CHINA'S CRUCIFIXION

Putnam Weale

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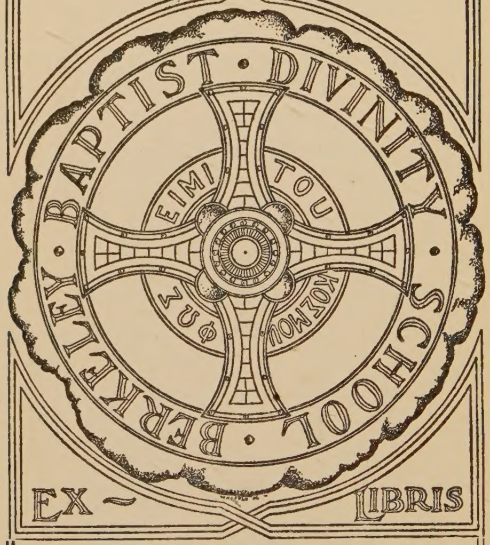

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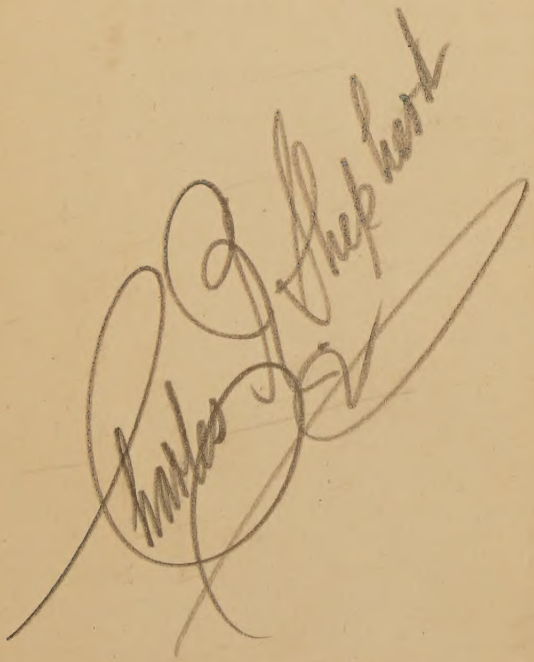

CHINA'S CRUCIFIXION

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CHINA'S CRUCIFIXION

Simpson, Bertram Lenox

BY

PUTNAM WEALE

AUTHOR OF "HER CLOSED HANDS"

resemble somewhat the case of Putnam Weale, British journalist at Peiping, who wrote violent articles attacking the National Government while enjoying British exterritorial protection at Peiping. Finally and largely as a result of Weale's propaganda, a number of northern Chinese generals were encouraged to rebel against Nanking, following which Weale was appointed customs commissioner at Tientsin by the said northern rebel generals. The National Government demanded that the British authorities arrest and deport Weale but this the British refused to do. Shortly afterward two Chinese assassins entered Weale's house in Tientsin and killed him, thus putting an effective though tragic conclusion to that case. The Chinese assassins never were apprehended.

New York

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1928

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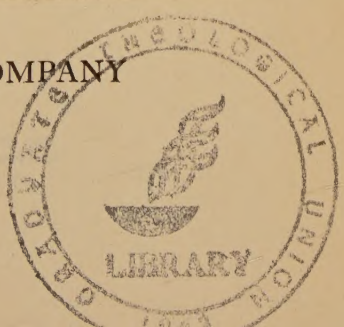

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"Write the vision and make it plain upon tables that he may run that readeth it."

HABAKKUK.

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BOOK I

VOICES IN THE WILDERNESS

CHINA'S CRUCIFIXION

I

THE soldier stood stiffly at attention just inside the threshold of the large temple room. His beady black eyes, looking out from a thin, sallow face, were the acme of watchfulness; there was nothing his commanding officer did that he did not immediately note.

General Wang, a short, thick-set man, was bending over a map which was lighted by a smoking lamp. Sometimes he consulted a piece of paper, then, leaning down again, he resumed his study.

"Is all ready?" he said at last, without looking up.

"All is ready," came the answer like a flash.

"Are the men posted?"

"The men are posted."

"Have all eaten—so that they can march until dawn?"

"They have eaten."

At that the officer dropped his study and walked across the room with quick, sharp steps to the door.

In the temple-court, under cover of a big tree from which was suspended a hurricane-lantern, a field-telephone was working; the soldier-operator had called up some unseen person and was making querulous remarks in a high-pitched voice. Sitting on the ground near his feet were two or three others, who were eating out of

a tin ration-box while they jested and acted playfully towards one another.

The officer watched them for some time, thinking of the drama he was about to set in motion. Yet his attitude was indifferent, as if everything that came to pass in this world had to be.

"What is it—is the connection faulty?" he said at last sharply.

The soldier-operator ripped off the head-phone and stood to attention, as he saw his general coming towards him.

"The connection is made," he replied, with soldierly brevity.

"What news have you?"

"There is no news, General. We were gossiping about a private matter merely to keep in touch."

At that General Wang made an indistinct comment, and walked across the courtyard to another room. A group of his officers were sitting there, with the same kind of smoking lamp there was in his room, drinking tea and smoking cigarettes.

As they saw him they, too, stood up.

"Please, please," he said politely, with a wave of his hand. "Please, stay at your ease."

Nevertheless they remained at attention. Something in their manner showed that he was feared.

"Do you still think this is a mad and unlucky enterprise?" he chuckled. "Do you still advise me to have nothing to do with it?"

They hesitated, as if not sure how much it was safe to say to a man who always did precisely as he had decided.

"Tell me your views," he insisted. "I like to hear what others have to say."

At that one of them replied:

"We were just saying that it was too daring a move—your courage is too great, General. To attack the countryside is one thing which we all can do on one excuse or another. But an express train full of foreigners—" He began shaking his head.

"Ho, ho," chuckled General Wang, "so our troops are attacking. I did not know that. I thought it was the brigands who were doing it."

He looked astonishingly young as he laughed. Yet no sooner had his laughter ceased than age seemed to descend on his features and harden them.

"No one will believe that they could do that without our connivance," replied his officer. "And if we have connived it is because it is to our interest."

General Wang was greatly amused.

"We have done more than connived," he guffawed. "We have inspired. And why?—" His face became hard—"Because this is the only way of punishing those who have opposed us—the only way of making them understand that I am no longer a small general, who can be pushed aside because I command but a brigade. Perhaps they will begin to believe that I am the most dangerous of the lot. They will surely believe it."

He ended so defiantly that no one dared to answer him. His logic was unanswerable in this Eastern world where men always retreat before determination.

"What else?" he inquired abruptly, as if he had been engaged in a general conversation. "Is there anything that remains to be settled?"

He looked steadily at the group.

"There is still the matter of the prisoners."

"I had not forgotten. I shall decide now."

Once more he walked across the courtyard, this time to where a sentry was standing with fixed bayonet.

"Open!" he said abruptly.

The man unbarred a door and threw it back. In the uncertain light a great crowd of miserable-looking fellows could be seen reclining in various attitudes on piles of straw.

"Up!" cried the sentry sharply, "our general is here."

The crowd shuffled to their feet.

General Wang watched them with an unfriendly eye. Yet in spite of the terror of his coming nobody spoke, nobody pleaded for his life.

"Why did you take up arms against us?" he said at last.

"We were told to do so," they wailed in chorus.

"Who told you?" he inquired sharply, although he very well knew.

"Messages came to us from the governor's Yamên—not once but several times. Already we have confessed. Our error was not of our making."

He turned triumphantly to his officers.

"You see—you hear? Messages from the governor's Yamên, messages sent at a moment when our force was dispersed and could be dealt with piecemeal. My reply will be of a subtle order, and the responsibility of the governor will be known to all. How many were shot of this band?"

"Sixty and more."

"How many remain?"

"Forty and more."

He became pensive. Around him was the silence of death.

"Well," he remarked at last, "no more will be shot.

You forty are lucky enough. You can return to your villages. But take back the news that if ever again my force is interfered with, if ever again my men are killed, not a village within a hundred *li* will be left standing. Go!"

They filed out, mumbling their thanks in a weak way. Perhaps they had already died so many times in their thoughts that they were spiritually no more than walking shades.

General Wang waited until the last of them had left, not because he had the slightest interest in them, but because he always did one thing at a time.

He did not mount his pony, however, but remained at the gateway of the temple with his officers, waiting for the signal to come through, and glancing quickly about him. Stretching along the roadway like an immense grey serpent, quite silent and motionless under the stars in an amazing way, was the whole of his brigade, with the exception of the men who had been posted in the afternoon along the adjoining roads. The quietness of these thousands of men in the night was oddly impressive; it gave the feeling that some great purpose was behind them—something powerful and malevolent. Only occasionally a mule or an ammunition-pony commenced whinnying. Then there was a brief oath as the driver struck it or jerked at the reins, and silence descended once more.

General Wang, satisfied that all was well, walked back towards the field-telephone.

The soldier-operator had ceased his interminable conversation, and was whiling away his time by sorting out the contents of a small foraging bag. The minutes sped by and nothing occurred. Then suddenly he threw the bag aside, and he answered sharply:

"Yes, yes, I am here, I have not moved. . . . What? Say it again. How many *li* away about? All right. Stop speaking, whilst I report."

He stood up with the head-phone still attached, and called in a loud voice:

"The train is seen—it is advancing across the plain ten or fifteen *li* from our post."

There was a short silence as he bent down. Then he resumed:

"It is very close. . . . Its speed is slowing. . . . It has commenced stopping. . . . Shots have been fired. . . . There is a great outcry. . . . It has stopped. Our post can see many figures. . . . The confusion is very great. . . . The train is captured and our post is closing. . . ."

He took off his head-phone; and commenced dismantling the apparatus preparatory to reeling up the wire.

General Wang had remained motionless among his officers, keenly listening through it all. Now he put his foot into his stirrup and swung himself into his saddle.

"March!" he cried.

At the door of the temple his chief of staff repeated the order, which echoed all along the line.

The column broke into a steady, shuffling tramp down the roadway, raising choking clouds of dust in the night.

* * * * * *

Early that evening the train, which was travelling towards its doom, had resounded with laughter and talk. Full of tourists and idle folk who had been tempted to travel by the magnificent new cars purchased by an innocent railway company, nothing was farther from their thoughts than a disaster. They had all been just long

enough together to have a nodding acquaintance; and now that the evening was drawing to its close they gossiped with one another in the corridors, or in the long drawing-room car.

"Tomorrow we shall be seeing the Tomb of Confucius," said Mrs. Briller, a grey-haired woman who was travelling with her niece. "I only wish this train didn't arrive at the uncanny hour of three A.M. Why can't they get someone to make more reasonable schedules for them?"

"Didn't that foreign-looking man, who seems to know so much about the country, say that night and day are the same to them, Aunt Edith?"

"He did. Now what was his name—Kettling? I do hope he will come in here again. There's that woman and the man who have intrigued us so much; she's got one of those Canton shawls, do you see? Mr. Kettling must know all about them; they are together all the time. There he is. I'm going to make him come and talk to us."

She signalled to a train-boy in a white coat, adorned with blue enamelled buttons, who had been standing lost in contemplation. She explained that she wanted him to ask the tall, dark gentleman with glasses to come to her.

"Oh, Mr. Kettling," she exclaimed, when her message had been duly conveyed; "won't you sit down for a few minutes with us and tell us some more interesting things about the country? You are the first person we have met since we landed who seems to know anything, or who takes any interest in the subject. The others dismiss it with a snort. It makes it so much more interesting to hear someone who lives in a place tell about it, don't you think? It's all so mysterious to us. Who is that interesting-looking couple you were just talking to?"

Dr. Kettling bowed gravely and sat down in one of the green plush swivel-chairs.

"Certainly," he said, answering all her questions at once, "I shall be very pleased to tell you all I know. I have been in China exactly twenty-five years. My hair was brown and bushy when I first arrived; now it is white and there is not very much of it, as you will readily see. Those two are very old friends of mine—Mr. and Mrs. Trent." He sighed and folded his hands.

"Have they been long in China too?" asked Mrs. Briller.

Dr. Kettling sighed again.

"Yes, yes, we are all, as the saying is, old China hands, although why a seafaring expression should be applied to residents on land I have never understood."

"Are they English?" continued Mrs. Briller.

"He is English and she is American. I suppose I had better tell you that there is an extraordinary story attached to them, as otherwise you will hear and believe one of the wholly fictitious accounts which are current. It was ten years ago, when she was another man's wife. I was present and know every detail. There had been a mutiny of troops in Peking at the end of the revolution which unseated the Manchu dynasty, and it was at night. I had taken refuge in Trent's house. The city was in flames; there was the sound of firing everywhere. We passed the most dreadful night I can ever recall, never knowing whether we would be massacred, never expecting to get through unscathed, although they still respected foreigners in those days. At about two o'clock in the morning Mrs. Trent appeared with her former husband, Scott, having managed to make her way through the city in spite of the great disorder. Scott appeared to be very

ill and immediately lay down on a sofa. His wife and I had some talk, as Trent was patrolling his grounds with a revolver in his hand. When he finally came in, it was Scott's condition that was the main subject of conversation. Scott said he was ill but wanted a drink, and then that he wanted to go to sleep. I dwell on these details because they are rather important as the true explanation. He drank a stiff whisky and soda and laid down again. Trent, accompanied by the lady, went out in a few minutes for a breath of air. The rest of the story hinges on the revolver. It was left behind on the table with the whisky. Scott could not avoid seeing it when he helped himself to another drink—and he shot himself dead clean through the heart."

"Oh," exclaimed Mrs. Briller and her niece together. "What an awful thing to happen."

Dr. Kettling nodded gloomily.

"I was not more than twenty yards away in the courtyard when it occurred. I couldn't help knowing all about it. The explosion was terrible—or perhaps it was my nerves. For ten years I have been wondering how much of that tragedy was due to chance and how much to design."

"What exactly do you mean?" said Mrs. Briller, sitting forward in her chair.

Dr. Kettling stared at the train-window as if absorbed.

"I don't know—no one can possibly know, not even Trent. Who has ever really found what is in a woman's heart? I certainly remember that she took Trent's revolver away from him, saying that she hated firearms,—that she would not go out with him if he carried it with him. I remember those words very clearly even after ten

years. So she placed the revolver on the tray with the bottle of whisky which Scott had drunk from. Was that chance or design?"

He was silent for a minute. Then he resumed meditatively.

"There was another surprising incident just before Scott shot himself. I ought to tell you this part because it may have had a bearing on Scott's action—and clear his wife. Several other shots were fired in the compound before he committed suicide. They came from some distance away, and I feared that mutinous soldiers had broken in. As a matter of fact it was a soldier who had fired, but he was not hostile to us—quite the contrary. You must think me queer for telling you this story in this inconsequential way, but we all become a little queer out here and suspicious, too, and see malign influences even in the creaking of a door. I have often watched a door by the hour, thinking of all the possibilities it hides. Nerves, you know, just nerves."

He laughed uneasily at the vividness of his own fancy.

Mrs. Briller exchanged glances with her niece. She was not sure she had made a correct estimate of Dr. Kettling.

"Frankly, this story does sound a little queer," she remarked briskly. "Let me try and get to the bottom. I understand the first part very well—that the first husband, a poor sort of person, shot himself with the present husband's revolver. But this last part?"

Kettling looked at her coldly, as if he resented the question.

"A boy—a Chinese boy we all called Wang did the other firing. He was a servant, a stable-boy. He had

been sent off weeks and months before carrying a letter to Scott, who had proceeded to the scene of the revolution on the Yangtsze for some purpose of his own, and had not been heard of for a long time. Mrs. Scott, as she was then, had become nervous—she thought him lost. So she borrowed this youth from Trent and sent him off with a letter to try and find him. Scott eventually turned up, saying that he had duly received her message but that the boy had deserted him and become a soldier. Rather miraculously, the errant youth turned up on the night of the mutiny with a squad of men just at the moment when Trent was walking with the lady. He fired his revolver because he said he had seen the ghosts who haunted the house. Nobody could possibly have foreseen that incident. The sound of those shots so close may have turned Scott's thoughts to the revolver lying beside him. But supposing there had not been those other shots, would he still have acted in the same way?"

"That is certainly less incoherent," remarked Mrs. Briller. "But you have aroused my curiosity about another point, the ghosts that haunted the house."

Dr. Kettling pointed his fingers together.

"That is really the beginning of the story. Trent took the house where all this occurred because it was said to be one of the haunted houses which are so common in Peking. He had restored it to a good condition and was living peacefully in it. There was an insistent story that the ghosts of the people who had been slaughtered there centuries before walked abroad on certain occasions. This soldier boy—Wang—knew the story very well. Mistaking some shadows of people, who had taken refuge on that particular night in the grounds, for the ghosts, he fired."

"The whole affair must have made a great sensation," mused Mrs. Briller. "How long was it before the lady married her present husband?"

"A month——"

"A month!" exclaimed the two ladies together. "Didn't that make rather a scandal?"

Kettling nodded gloomily.

"A scandal very painful to me, as Trent has always been a very dear friend. It was that which really led to the invention of the many stories that are now current. People hadn't thought much about it until then. But after that there was no holding them. They said that she made her first husband shoot himself—that she had planned the whole thing. Some even said that she shot him herself."

"A woman of character," put in Mrs. Briller. "Now that has given me an intense interest in Peking."

"You will wonder perhaps why I have said so much," mused Dr. Kettling, "but it has been all brought back to me vividly by a chance meeting. There is a man on board named Dumont whom I have not seen or heard of since then, an engineer who was mixed up with Scott in some way we have never discovered. We only know that Scott met him during his travels among the revolutionists, and that Dumont undertook to help him with his schemes—he was looking for engineering concessions. Apparently Dumont failed to make good his promise, as two telegrams from him were found in the dead man's pocket-book telling him that he could help him no more."

"It is certainly dramatic enough if such things happen often," remarked Mrs. Briller.

Thereupon Dr. Kettling said:

"China is like a woman—her mental processes are dif-

ferent from ours. She loves flattery and hates advice, and she inspires dramatic actions."

"That puts the last question I want to ask into my mouth," said Mrs. Briller, smiling at him. "You will answer, won't you? It's about the Trents again. Does he love her?"

At that Dr. Kettling drew a deep breath and stared at her through his glasses.

"Does he love her?" he repeated blankly. "Do you mind if I say that that is an intolerable question?"

Mrs. Briller was so surprised that she coloured.

"Intolerable—a peculiar word to use—why intolerable?"

"Because it is one that I cannot endure; absolutely the correct word, you see."

"I'm sorry," said Mrs. Briller, very shortly. "I'm sorry you take it like that."

Dr. Kettling looked at his watch and rose suddenly.

"I am afraid I have been rather a babbler, but I hope you two ladies will not misunderstand me. Trent is my friend, my very dear friend,—I can never forget all he has done for me. But I had to tell you the true story or else you would certainly have believed some China coast tale. Good-night, good-night, I hope you will sleep well."

He bowed politely and walked stiffly down the aisle.

The two women looked at one another as if not knowing what to say.

"He hates that woman with a deadly hatred," said Mrs. Briller's niece, Gladys. "Did you see how artfully he showed it?"

To which her aunt rejoined:

"I wonder what arguments she used to get him to marry her so quickly? It all sounds a little like the wives of Wellington's soldiers in Spain. They took new

husbands immediately after a battle had disposed of the old ones. I'm so glad we came here."

Kettling, hastening along the corridor, came upon Trent standing precisely where he had hoped to find him. Trent had pushed open the heavy door at the end of his car, and was surveying the sleeping countryside as he stood there and smoked.

"Hullo, old man," he said jovially, "I thought you had gone to bed ages ago."

Kettling shook his head.

"I have been talking to two ladies in the drawing-room car. Their curiosity is insatiable. This must have been the fourth conversation we have had today. The things they want to know about China——"

He broke off, as if aware that Trent was not paying attention to him. In point of fact he was leaning as far out of the doorway as he could, as if something were engrossing him.

"Do you notice how we slow down every so often when there is no gradient at all?" he said at last. "Twice since I have been standing here I have seen lights flash up and flash out again, and several times I have heard voices in the night as the train passed."

Kettling shrugged his shoulders.

"That means nothing in a country where people turn night into day. What was the name of the last station?"

Trent pulled at his pipe.

"I think I saw it—Lincheng."

"A mountainous district," said Kettling. "The boundary between two provinces. It may be steeper than you think; which would account for the slowing-down——"

"Listen," interrupted Trent suddenly—"listen to those voices right on the bank there."

Both men craned their heads out as far as they could. A veritable babel of voices arose suddenly as the brilliantly-lighted train slipped by; then the sounds were lost in the rumbling of the wheels.

"It is certainly very curious," admitted Kettling. "I hope it doesn't mean anything."

The train began slowing down perceptibly even as he spoke. Presently the brakes were applied so suddenly that they were nearly jerked off their feet. Then the brakes were released and the train sprang forward once more, only to be almost stopped again.

"Something is happening. I'm convinced," cried Trent. "They've got armed police on the train and we ought to get them. Here——"

Two police in black braided uniforms and top-boots tore past, drawing their heavy Mauser revolvers as they ran.

"What is it?" cried Kettling and Trent together in the vernacular.

"*Tu-fei*—bandits," came the staccato reply.

Trent sprang down the corridor towards his coupé.

"I must get my revolver. My wife——"

Kettling never heard the rest. For there was a splutter of shots, shrieks and cries as the train came to a dead stop. One of the two policemen ran back down the corridor clawing at his chest, falling before he reached Kettling. Now there was a veritable storm of cries as from every side hundreds of ragged armed men sprang out of the night. Up and down the motionless carriages came an endless shrieking as the people were brutally pulled out. As he rushed towards Trent's coupé, Kettling had a brief vision through the open door of Mrs. Trent flinging on an overcoat, while her husband was tearing at a suit-case. A

shriek from the neighbouring compartment made him plunge forward just in time to see a European woman, her breasts naked, beating away from her a couple of ruffians who were plucking at her rings, her earrings.

He shouted at them madly in the vernacular and for a moment they paused. Then one of the two pointed his revolver squarely at his chest and drove him back.

Other ruffians, pouring into the corridor, seized him from behind and pinioned him. Vulture-like hands plucked at his pockets and took from him his watch, his pocket-book, everything of value, and then hurried him off the train.

Already many had been herded together, and stood weeping and expostulating. He heard shots as if there was still resistance. He wondered with a fearful heart-pang if Trent had found his revolver. But already he was being pushed along with the great crowd of people—the bandits were plainly anxious to leave the scene as speedily as possible.

"*Tso*—forward," shrieked one man after another as they pounded at their captives. "*Tso*—forward," they cried again as the captives lagged. They plied their rifle-butts, and one man struck with a whip.

Into the night they disappeared, leaving behind the magnificent train still lighted up as for a gala.

II

Less than ten miles away, completely hidden by low barren hills that in the dim morning light looked like the billows of some primeval sea, General Wang's brigade was steadily marching nearer. It betrayed its presence more by the dense yellow clouds the tramping feet raised than by the long snake-like movement along the cart-tracks. For the men, powdered from head to foot in alkali dust, and clad in their habitual grey uniforms, seemed to melt into the earth, to be imperceptible. The scouts, a mile off on either flank, constantly remarked to another, as they rode backwards and forwards, that if it were not for the dark patches made by the ammunition-ponies they would have been hard put to know where the column had got to; although, with the transport and the supplies and the many camp-followers, there were several thousand men and many hundred animals marching.

"Truly, we are numerous," remarked the scouts, taking it as a personal tribute that their commander had managed to double their numbers in less than a year.

The rising sun, casting long thin pale rays on the men as they shuffled along, was greeted by them with audible comments, half-humorous, half-bitter. They were going forward at the monotonous gait they had learnt in childhood; they could trudge on like that for endless hours without complaint, without water, too, except for the small amounts they carried in their water-bottles, and with no food at all. Their comments were always preceded

by the same words—there was never any change. *"Yao Ming*—it takes one's life," they would mutter. Then, as if in contradiction of these words, they would stride out lustily, the lusty sons of a lusty peasantry, not feeling their packs or their heavy loads of ammunition, but oppressed by the thought that more was being asked of them than their contract called for.

General Wang, on the same restive piebald pony, was at the head of the column. Twice during the night he had dismounted and walked for long spells, talking to the men in their rough vernacular and establishing that personal contact which was the secret of his power. His officers, not yet accustomed to such a strenuous commander, even though he had owned the brigade body and soul for more than a year, were dissatisfied with the call he had made on their energy by this long night march which had followed days of secret negotiations with disreputable emissaries. They grumbled together in undertones as they blinked at the rising sun. But they were careful always to see that he was nowhere near. For General Wang could treat his officers more savagely than his men; it was on record that he had had publicly flogged a colonel for allowing a store-house to burn down—a precious store-house containing three months' supplies. That had made a scandal throughout the entire brigade. But General Wang's only reply to protests was savage threats.

Now they watched him attentively as he suddenly cantered off, followed by his orderly.

"What is he up to?" said a company commander to his subaltern, marching beside him.

"He is going up the hill—he wishes to see what is near us. The last scout in said the railway was only two miles away."

"We have been marching for seven hours with only one halt," grumbled the company commander. "It is enough to break one's heart."

From file to file there was a murmur of voices as they watched their commander. Always unconventional and self-willed, nevertheless no one had ever seen him do this before. He had ridden up the hill to the only tree on the eminence, and with the help of his orderly had climbed up it. Now he was seated on a branch, with his binoculars glued to his eyes, as comfortable as if he had been in a chair.

The brigade watched him, fascinated as they shuffled along. Imperceptibly their pace diminished as heads turned and lips made comments, until in the end the leading companies were not doing much more than marking time.

"He has truly strength," the soldiers said approvingly, giving their unstinted admiration to the thing they valued next to wealth. "Up a tree, across a river, it is all the same to him."

General Wang was, however, no longer up a tree. He had slid down with surprising speed. He was once more on his piebald pony which he directed at a gallop towards the head of the column.

"Halt!" he cried, as he approached, "form camp below these hills. We rest here."

The orders were repeated hoarsely from battalion to battalion. The men fell out with glee, and commenced piling arms. They drove their transport mules to the side of the road, and with savage kicks ranged them conveniently together so that they could unload the equipment. The company cooks took the giant iron kettles and the shallow circular grain cookers from the packs, and

in no time had them adjusted on iron tripods. Men wandered off with wooden buckets slung on bamboo carrying-poles, and jog-trotted back with their buckets full of water from wells which only very keen eyes could have discovered. Soon the camp had become a veritable kitchen, with everyone doing something to expedite the preparation of the meal, with every thought centred on the hot meal. The younger men commenced singing in high-pitched falsetto voices. Tea was ready—hundreds of tea-pots appeared from nowhere, and each man made his own infusion. The animals, with their heads down over their chopped straw and grain, sniffed at the smell of the food and took an interest in the proceedings which seemed almost human.

Presently the millet had been cooked and so had the vegetables. A cry passed from cauldron to cauldron. The men crowded round with their bowls and chop-sticks in their hands, and filled their utensils to the utmost. The brigade was once more happy.

General Wang, sitting meditatively on a low bank, with his cap off, wiped his closely-cropped head with a piece of towelling steeped in hot water which had been handed him as a delicate attention. He shifted his attention from his head to his face, which he rubbed so vigorously that it became stained with red.

"A long night," he remarked jovially to his orderly, the Rat, yawning a bit and stretching himself. "But tonight we can sleep and today, too, unless there is an alarm."

"What will your Honour eat?" inquired the orderly.

"*Mien-tiao* (macaroni), a big bowl, too. Hunger has gained me."

The orderly received the piece of hot towelling back and marched off.

"There's the man for us," he said to the cook, at work stripped to the waist. "He eats what we all eat, with nothing added to it. He eats in quantities, and rapidly too, and with no thought except his food until he has finished, when his mind is not concerned with the matter."

Having finished this appropriate eulogy, he carried back an enormous coarse earthenware bowl, piled high with macaroni, together with two chop-sticks; and under his arm he had a tea-pot and a cup.

General Wang, flourishing the chop-sticks, took great mouthfuls of the macaroni, nodding his head approvingly all the while. The orderly had time to think of himself. He went back to the cook and commenced eating himself, squatting on his haunches and talking with his mouth full.

"Do you know why he climbed the tree?" he inquired. "I will tell you. The railway can be seen from there, and also the town near which the train-robbery took place. He wishes to see the condition; he looked through his glasses. He said there were many people about; there must be much excitement. It was a train full of foreigners and he knows where they have been taken to. Now, of course, you understand that this being beyond our territory, we have entered it in advance of any official notice being given us so that we may have the advantage of the others when the alarm is given. We shall be the first in the pursuit; the first to capture the robbers; the first to set the foreigners free. You see the plan? Ah—" He jumped to his feet, set down his bowl, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he ran.

General Wang had finished his meal and called.

"The secretary," he commanded.

The orderly saluted, and wheeled.

A hundred yards off, under the shade of a bit of blue awning that had been put up on four short poles, that portion of the staff that was concerned with the administration of the brigade had just finished their food, and were beginning to open shallow, red pigskin trunks full of documents.

"The general invites you," said the orderly, without saluting the secretary,—in fact giving him an ironical look as if he were pleased that unexpected work should be placed on his shoulders.

"What is it—do you know?" inquired the secretary, who was a cadaverous-looking individual nicknamed "the opium-smoker," although he had not the money nor the opportunities to indulge himself in pipe-dreams.

"Writing," said the orderly who did not know, but who would not confess his ignorance. "Certainly it is something to write."

Forthwith the scribe took from one of the shallow, red pigskin trunks his writing-materials and a short flat board, which gave him the necessary arm-rest when there was no table to write upon and without which he could not work. Then, with a certain deliberation, as if to advertise that he belonged to the literate class which could be invited but not ordered, he made his way to his commanding officer.

General Wang did not notice him. He was sitting now with his chin on his hands staring into a world which belonged to him alone; calculating his chances and wondering what would be the result of the sensational

message he proposed to send, the brilliant telegram which should bring him his division by making his name and energy known to everyone in the land. In ordinary circumstances he would not have dared to do a thing which would certainly have led to a stiff reprimand, if not dismissal. But the government was now so weak that it might welcome something tending to show that it was still the mighty Central Government, whose behests everyone tremblingly obeyed, and to whom exceptional circumstances must be reported. In any case he was determined to try it.

The secretary, having seated himself and prepared his writing-materials, including the ink-slab which he had moistened with water, cleared his throat audibly.

General Wang looked at him inquiringly.

"What did you say?" he remarked, in a very absent-minded way.

"I said nothing," said the secretary, "but everything is now ready."

"Write," commanded General Wang in his dictatorial way, suddenly making up his mind. Then he commenced dictating. "To the minister in charge of military affairs. An urgent communication. Since foreign relations are affected I place information I possess immediately at your disposal to protect our national interests. Last night the express train containing nearly one hundred important foreigners was stopped through connivance between the brigands and unknown persons. Many shots were fired and several people killed and wounded. The brigands, having robbed the train, drove all the foreigners in front of them into the hills. In the middle of the night my scouts informed me of this disaster. Without hesitation

or delay, although beyond my patrolling territory, before daylight I started in pursuit. My scouts, having followed the brigands, have already discovered their line of retreat. Within two days my troops will surround them and annihilate them."

Having finished dictating, General Wang sat back to think of things from a different angle. He crossed his hands, uncrossed them, and looked at his watch. Then a great smile came over his hard, ugly face as if some amusing thought had stirred him, a smile which lent it such a pleasing and winning expression that the secretary was amazed. The smile, instead of disappearing, broadened and broadened until a young man seemed to leap out of that seared countenance; a young man at play with the world and no longer oppressed with the duty of controlling and feeding six thousand men.

The thought was so humorous that it took some time for his composure to return. But finally he said: "I'm a clever one! I've made our troops march twenty miles in three hours. That is if the telegram were sent now. Five hours must pass before it is sent—five full hours. You understand?"

He sank into a brown study again, and mechanically began toying with his watch-chain. The secretary decided to speak; if the general had corrected one error, he could correct another.

"There is a further point which requires attention in this message," he remarked, ceremonially.

"What?" grunted his chief, looking at him savagely because he knew exactly what he was going to say.

The secretary's heart quailed but he persisted.

"It is the address," he said hurriedly. "As it stands

it is to be despatched to the minister in charge of military affairs."

"Well?" said General Wang.

"Our messages go to the military governor of the province; we have not the right of directly memorializing."

"This one," interrupted General Wang violently, "goes as it is addressed. From today we enter into direct relations with the Ministry in Charge of Military Affairs."

The secretary remained mute—his mouth open. He dimly realized that he was face to face with an elaborate scheme, and that he had been foolish enough not to see it.

"At what hour should the telegram be despatched?" he asked obsequiously.

"At noon—precisely. A copy will go to the military governor tomorrow."

General Wang got up, adjusted his cap and his belt, and commenced walking towards the solitary squadron of cavalry his command possessed.

The men had chosen a nice spot all to themselves. The ponies had been unsaddled and tied by their halters to long lines stretched between spikes driven into the ground. Although their stamping and fidgetting seemed perpetual, they stood with lowered heads, drowsy from their long night march.

General Wang walked down the lines without a word, his hands behind his back and his keen eyes noting everything. Two sergeants followed him respectfully, while the rest of the squadron lay sleeping heavily just as they had thrown themselves down after eating.

"Half of them have sore backs," commented General Wang caustically.

"Only twenty," said one sergeant.

"How many can start this afternoon?"

"All," said the man. "Sore backs are nothing."

"Where is the major?"

The two men pointed. Far off under the shadow of a hill all the officers of the brigade were still together, eating and talking and smoking.

"Invite him," said General Wang in the customary way.

One of the two started off at a run. General Wang, going a few steps, picked up a carbine, threw open the breech, and looked down the barrel. He repeated the operation several times, only tiring when something fresh caught his attention.

This time it was dried cabbage tied to a case of ammunition.

"How many times must I say that we do not shoot food from guns!"

He tore off the dried cabbages and hurled them wrathfully away. Then on a fresh inspiration he opened the ammunition-case. It was only half-full of cartridges; the rest of the space was filled with small miscellaneous packages.

He undid them one by one, spilling the contents on the ground as he enumerated each article. "Tea, cigarettes, tobacco, and this—?" He bent down and smelt it. "Ha—Opium. The cavalry of my mixed brigade can afford itself opium. Who—I ask?"

He made a furious gesture.

"This is not my section," stammered the sergeant.

The rest of what he was saying was lost. General Wang, having spied the major commanding the squadron approaching rapidly, turned on him brutally.

"You can only eat—what—not attend to your duties? When was there last an inspection? Twenty horses with

sore backs, never reported to me. I look by chance and find opium and other supplies. Opium—who smokes opium?"

The major, frightened by this outburst, did not attempt to reply. He stood stiffly at attention, like the veriest private, hoping that the storm would pass.

General Wang marched up and down working towards his climax.

"A fine troop of cavalry this! Soon you will be able to trade, to open a shop! They will all know that from you they can get instant delivery of all prohibited things, transportation by horse, quick transportation. Who is in charge of this ammunition-box?"

The major, though there was fear in his heart, retained his presence of mind. He saluted again, and said rapidly to the sergeant:

"Sound the assembly."

The sergeant ran back and pulled up a trumpeter who was asleep on his back snoring like a drunken man. The trumpeter staggered to his feet, still half in his dreams, and mechanically commenced blowing harshly and discordantly.

Instantly there was a great bustle among the squadron which spread to the rest of the camp. The troopers scrambled to their feet and ran to their ponies as if fearing an attack. The major, now master of the situation, stopped them with a loud command. They fell in clumsily.

"Who is in charge of this?" he cried after he had bent down and read the number on the ammunition-case.

A youth stepped forward.

General Wang, who had watched these developments without a word, gave a fierce snort.

"Him—that small boy! I don't believe it. Still if it is his ammunition-box he must suffer. Come here."

The young soldier marched up.

"Your age?"

"Eighteen."

"Your province?"

"Shantung."

"Which prefecture?"

"T'engchow."

"Your name?"

"Wang—Wang Yi P'eng."

At this his general laughed.

"The same patronymic though I hope not the same disposition. How came the opium in the ammunition-box?"

"It was put there by others."

"What others?"

"I do not know."

General Wang, with his legs far apart and his shrewd eyes on the boy's face, made a violent gesture.

"A lie! Sergeant, the straps and four men to hold him. Off with his tunic."

The young soldier was seized and stripped to the waist. His thin brown torso as he knelt on the ground seemed like that of a child—not a man. His face, blanched by the prospect of a cruel punishment, was, however, not pathetic to his commander who eyed him unfavourably.

The sergeant and the four men, accustomed to scenes of brutality, did as they were ordered in a mechanical way. A saddle girth was fixed round his chest; then ropes tied to it and to his wrists so that he could be hauled taut.

The sergeant, with the leather straps in his hand, now turned inquiringly.

"Strike!" ordered General Wang.

The leather straps whistled through the air and came into violent contact with the thin brown torso which forthwith turned a dull red. Drops of blood formed; the victim moaned and hung his head.

"Stop!" cried General Wang, after only four blows. "Release him and let him stand."

The young soldier, trembling violently, came to his feet.

"Now let this be a lesson to all," announced General Wang. "I have shown mercy and given only the beginning of punishment. But if ammunition-cases are ever used again the whole squadron will be flogged. Dismiss. Major, come with me."

He began moving off when his orderly, the Rat, appeared running. He had a big official envelope in his hand, with a red strip running down it lengthwise on which was written the superscription.

"From the military governor," cried the Rat, out of breath. "Two mounted messengers were carrying it and arrived this very moment."

General Wang was disconcerted—and showed it.

"From the military governor? How did the messengers find me—when we have only just arrived?" He fingered the big envelope unenthusiastically, turning it over several times but not attempting to open it.

"They started from the city early this morning, but five miles from here they heard from the country-people that our brigade had passed and so they rode back."

This information proved even more disconcerting than

the first part. General Wang frowned heavily, because he was full of suspicion. His elaborate plan was in danger unless he acted swiftly.

"Where are the two?" he said harshly.

The riders, leading sweating white ponies, approached.

"What time did you start?" asked General Wang.

"Soon after daylight. Four parties with the circular instruction from the military governor were sent, our party being designated for your Honour. We heard at the village that your Honour's troops had been crossing while it was still night, so we turned back."

General Wang's expression had become placid. A circular instruction had no significance at all.

"It is well," he remarked. "The news of the robbery was known to me. I commenced marching at once. We shall have them surrounded as soon as my men have rested."

He turned on his heel, followed by the major. When he was out of earshot he said quickly: "Pick the two best riders. I have an urgent message. They must be ready within ten minutes. The rest of the troop is to be ready to march at four o'clock. The brigade will start at six."

Then he turned to the orderly.

"Inform the secretary that the telegram is to go now, within ten minutes. Bring it for sealing."

Now he resumed his walk. This time he headed straight for his headquarters where two sentries were patrolling beside his regimental flags. Seating himself on the rough bench which had been placed there, he took off his cap again and mopped his head.

The two cavalrymen were approaching leading their ponies, the orderly talking to them in undertones. From another direction the secretary was bearing him the fate-

ful telegram. From yet a third direction came officers of the commissariat who wished for authority to make necessary purchases. General Wang had no eyes for anyone but the secretary who tendered him the telegram.

"Seal," said General Wang, reaching into his tunic pocket and taking out a wallet in which was a large stone seal and a sealing-pad of vermilion ink.

He watched every face with his shrewd eyes while this was being done. He knew that everyone would note the change he had made. His seal was no longer the small square common to everyone, but the great square used by army commanders, military governors, high statesmen, and other illustrious persons.

A smile crept into the corners of his eyes as he saw the secretary's expression. The smile deepened as he saw the officers of the commissariat department open their mouths. But he said nothing, not a word, until the telegram had been folded and placed in the big official envelope, and handed to the two cavalrymen. Then he remarked sternly: "You will ride hard, despatch without delay, and return at once."

As they galloped off he turned to the men of the commissariat, granted everything they asked with a nod of the head, and walked away with his head sunk between his shoulders because he wished to be alone and think.

III

At the very moment when General Wang and his brigade were acting in such an inexplicable manner, a little ceremony was taking place at the railway-station in the Capital, a ceremony, be it remarked, which has been enacted times without number in the past, and cannot fail to be as regularly repeated in the future. Briefly, diplomacy was engaged in saying good-bye to a colleague; and in obedience to a convention as unbreakable as the laws of the Medes and the Persians, one and all the representatives had repaired to the rather gloomy structure where stood the express which had the honour of bearing home the plenipotentiary from the Central American Republic. Suitably dressed in a morning-coat (which he proposed to change as soon as the train was in motion) and shod in faultless patent-leather boots (which he also proposed to change) the minister from the Saffron Republic knew an importance and a dignity which had frankly never been his at diplomatic meetings. For once he was the centre of the comedy, treated with a courtesy and a warmth of feeling which functionaries only know when they are bidding one another good-bye. One after another they came up to him and wrung his hand, protesting that their acquaintance had been all too short and that they had no consolation but the thought that they would inevitably meet at some other post—which made the departing one smile wryly, as he had just been displaced—probably for ever—

from the service of his country by an unavoidable revolution, a fact which everyone knew.

"There are points of resemblance, I believe, between your country and this one which eventually will reconcile you to going away," suggested Monsieur Damian, one of his colleagues who had a reputation for being witty by constantly saying things susceptible of a number of interpretations. And because several people rather cruelly tittered, the departing diplomat bridled.

"In exactly what respect?" he inquired, with fire.

To which Monsieur Damian imperturbably replied:

"You have something of the same climate; there is the same indifference, if I may be permitted to say, to the element of time. And you have the same good manners."

A lady touched him on the arm.

"You just saved yourself from a declaration of war," she suggested. "This is the most brilliant send-off of the season. I have never seen so many people for a noon train."

"I do not wish to detract from the deserved popularity of Central America," said Monsieur Damian, "but I understand that all these English and Americans are waiting for the Green Express which is already four hours late. It comes in on the next track."

"The Green Express isn't in yet! The Trents are on her and so is Dr. Kettling and a lot of other people. What can have happened?"

"Anything or nothing," said Monsieur Damian. "What are four hours in the lives of the Chinese?"

"I'm going to find out," said the lady, with decision. "Somebody must know."

Several railway officials, with much gold braid on their caps and sleeves, had come on to the platform and were

bustling about. Up to them the lady hurried with her interrogation.

"There has been an accident, a small accident," replied one of them in excellent English. "A special is coming in with some officials to report——"

"An accident—what kind of accident?" she insisted.

But the officials had rushed towards a locomotive with a single carriage attached to it, which had just steamed in silently and which immediately disgorged a number of people who hastened towards the station offices.

The lady came back in despair.

"If you will wait one little minute," said Monsieur Damian, "I will enlighten you. A telegram has just been sent to me here from my Chancery." There was, in effect, a soldier-messenger standing by who had just succeeded in picking him out from the crowd.

Conscious that every eye was upon him, Monsieur Damian acted with deliberation. He fixed his eye-glass in his eye, unfolded his telegram, and held it steadily in his two hands while he perused it.

"Well—what is it?"

"The Green Express has been robbed by bandits at a point near the Shantung boundary," he announced. "All the European and native passengers have been taken off the train by the bandits to the hills, except a few who were shot. That's my message. A nice country this."

"But that's precisely the route I have to follow," excitedly exclaimed the representative from Central America. "If I were not afraid of losing my luggage I should get off the train."

"It oughtn't to be anything of a novelty to him," suggested someone. "Here is another point of resemblance. You might have mentioned it."

Monsieur Damian gave a little laugh. But the more serious side of the business was already engaging him. This meant work, irritations, endless meetings. He wondered how many of his nationals were involved. With much whistling the express bearing the Central American representative began moving off. No one was paying attention to him; they were fully absorbed by the news of the unexpected catastrophe.

"We've got confirmation," announced someone else, "and more details. It took place at about eleven o'clock last night. One foreigner was killed and all the police as well. There must have been a fight. As far as can be learnt there were about a hundred Europeans on the train."

"A hundred!" exclaimed a chorus of voices. "There must have been a lot of tourists."

By force of repetition the episode rapidly acquired tragic proportions; people ventured the most extraordinary theories as they swept out of the station.

"In any case this has waked up diplomacy," said the lady who had been so talkative. "It's lucky they were all at the station together. They've arranged to have a meeting in a quarter of an hour."

"What can they do—what do they ever do?" said a friend. "Protest, protest! If the trains aren't safe, we might as well go home at once."

"You never know," she replied.

Thus did they talk as they scattered—with the exception of the diplomats, who all headed for the modest little mansion which sheltered the dean—a choleric man with a fine moustache whose one interest in life was the sanctity of the protocol. At this juncture, as the meeting was a little irregular, not having been summoned by circular,

he was engaged in disputing with his chancery clerk how it should be entered in the records; more particularly whether it should be classed as supplementary or whether it should go into the regular series.

"Here we all are," he said at last. "As the hour is so near luncheon I propose we proceed to business at once."

They seated themselves round a long table of the stipulated kind, taking care to select their seats by seniority and apologizing profusely whenever an inadvertent error was committed.

The dean began with a little speech that was neatly put.

"The question before us today must be put by me a little irregularly because there has been no time to circulate notices. As you are all aware, we are still greatly in the dark regarding the deplorable outrage which has just been committed. The fact, however, is beyond dispute that an express train has been stopped and all our nationals removed, of whom apparently one has been killed. Who this unfortunate individual is has not yet been ascertained. The competent railway authorities have assured me unofficially over the telephone that every possible step is already being taken to effect rescue, news having reached the Capital at seven o'clock this morning."

"Seven o'clock this morning," murmured M. Damian. "That is an astounding admission. We have been kept in the dark by the competent authorities for nearly five hours, as it is now noon."

The dean, who had not yet formally initiated discussion, looked severe; but he forbore from making the critical remark that was on the tip of his tongue.

"As I was saying," he resumed as if only inaudible

words had been spoken, "definite news was in the hands of the Government early this morning. Why, one may reasonably ask, were we not informed—at least the office of the dean? That is my first point."

"Precisely what I suggested," murmured M. Damian incorrigibly.

"The second point is that some urgent action is imperative. As there is no time to prepare a formal note, I propose that I communicate a *note verbale* with the least possible delay."

"I associate myself with those remarks," said the American representative. "In any case I shall take action myself as soon as I have the names of all American citizens on the train. They were cabled for half an hour ago."

"I suggest," said the dean, in his most dulcet tones, "that this is just one of those cases where collective action will prove more fruitful—certainly in the initial stages."

"How many nationalities are involved?" inquired a Scandinavian, who, because his country had been a signatory of one of the earliest Treaties, deemed that he had a prescriptive right to intervene at a very early stage.

The dean held up his arms.

"We have only suppositions. We suppose that there will be at least five or six nationalities involved; but the number might be greater."

"Would it not be wiser to wait until there is more definite information?" suggested another colleague, simply because he wished to speak.

"What more definite information do you require than that a train-load of our people have been kidnapped?" inquired the American representative, who had no patience with the smaller Powers. "Mr. Dean, I propose that you

go ahead at once with your verbal note, and we can meet again as soon as we have something to talk about. If there is no other business I will ask you gentlemen to excuse me, as I have a luncheon engagement at the other end of the city."

"One minute, please," interrupted the dean. "Are we all agreed? If so I will proceed and we can meet again tomorrow morning. I propose to demand the most energetic measures, including a general mobilization of all troops in the districts affected."

There was a murmur of approval.

"In addition to the verbal note, in the course of the afternoon," continued the dean, warming to his work, "I shall send in an *aide-mémoire* recounting the main facts as they are known to us and protesting that any repetition of this unparalleled event will lead to the gravest doubts as to the ability of the Government to control the situation."

M. Damian exploded almost involuntarily.

"I have no doubt myself as to the inability of the Government to control anything, and I think that sentence might be made more explicit."

The dean looked serious.

"The *aide-mémoire* will be published. We have to think of the press. We have carefully to safeguard ourselves against any imprudences at this early date."

"I agree in principle with those remarks," said the American representative, who had risen and was about to search for his hat. "Particularly as we have nothing but brief telegrams to work on and have not yet communicated with our Governments."

The chancery clerk had entered the room with several sheets of paper in his hands. He approached the dean

on the tips of his toes as if he were in a church, and began talking to him *sotto voce* as he laid the sheets in front of him.

"Some fresh information?" inquired M. Damian, rubbing his hands because these meetings were a source of joy to him.

"Reuter," replied the dean impressively, as if he were announcing the name of a patent medicine. "A complete list of all the passengers, despatched at urgent rates." He began to read them out.

There was exclamation after exclamation as the names of well-known residents appeared in the midst of those who were utter strangers. The American representative, on hearing the historic name of the world's greatest producer of petroleum, forgot all about his urgent luncheon engagement and put down his hat.

"Well, I'm damned," he remarked conversationally, to the British representative. "This puts a different complexion on the business for me. I've got to get busy at once. Mr. Dean, would you mind letting me have that first sheet?"

In the purely human emotions which had been aroused the rigidity of the meeting relaxed. The continents of Europe and America felt for a few fleeting seconds a solidarity they had never previously experienced. M. Damian, who loved to write, had taken out a gold-mounted pencil and was rapidly seeing how many nationalities he could recognize among the names.

"Seven," he said triumphantly, "French, British, American, Italian, German, Danish and German."

"There was apparently not a single Japanese on the train," said the British *chargé d'affaires,* who had been to the Washington Conference, and who was obsessed with

the idea that its decisions were the touchstone which should be used to test the position of Far Eastern politics.

Everybody looked at the Japanese representative, impressed by the significance of this observation.

"Very sorry," said the Mikado's representative, giving a deprecating laugh although it was not clear why he was sorry. "But my collaboration is assured and my Government will give every support."

An atmosphere almost of joviality began to dominate the gathering. The dean leaned back with a contented smile, like an impresario who has successfully put through an unrehearsed performance. The American representative had found his hat again and had apparently decided that the claims of luncheon were more urgent than those of the person bearing the historic oil name. He was assuring people that he would be at his desk by three o'clock; and that anyone who wanted his latest information could ring him up. Gradually the others made their way out after elaborately shaking hands with the dean, who now walked with sedate steps into his own dining-room and commenced his lunch, causing at the same time a message to be telephoned to the Government that he was on his way and required an immediate interview.

Everybody was waiting for him when he arrived—four secretaries in neatly-made European clothes; a tall, gaunt vice-minister who affected Chinese dress because that seemed to him to express Nationalism; and lastly, the minister himself, who was distinctly nervous. Instead of being taken into an office, he was led ceremonially to the largest reception-room in the building where a vast collection of *objets d'art* created the illusion that here was enshrined something of China's historic power to make all her converts.

"This is a terrible affair; I have come first to protest, in the name of all my colleagues, and then to invite you to take action in the terms I shall indicate," began the dean without ceremony in French, as soon as the doors had been closed. Whereupon the four secretaries bowed and began translating these few words together as though they would lose nothing by repetition—despite the fact that it was the duty of the dean's interpreter, who sat on the edge of his chair, to translate his chief's words.

To this came the reply that the Government were much troubled by the event and deeply apologized for it, but that it was believed that the motives which had prompted it were peculiar.

"What possible other explanation can there be but that of pure brigandage?" remarked the dean.

His host, however, slowly and sadly shook his head. It was hardly possible to believe, he remarked, that brigandage was at the bottom. The Government were already convinced that investigation would disclose something far more complicated; he hardly liked to do more than hint at it at this early stage.

The dean was intrigued by this subtlety. He remembered that he was here to learn as well as to threaten.

"To be precise, you suggest?" he ventured.

"That this is a blow aimed directly at the Government, to embarrass us; to cause all our good friends whom you today so ably represent to importune us, thus weakening our mandate and preparing the way for others to take our place."

This reasoning was so totally unexpected, and so ill-accorded with what he had expected, that the dean fairly gasped. He could not fail to recognize the advantage it suddenly conferred. It made the party responsible for the

outrage an object of commiseration, the nations of the West doing precisely what the malefactors had calculated they would do.

The dean fixed his monocle more firmly in his eye and decided that he could only recover the initiative by sternness, and a refusal to listen to a point of view which was diplomatically irrelevant.

"I have come here today," he said in a very firm way, "to protest in the most energetic manner possible against an outrage on seven nationalities—against the fact that a hundred of our nationals, men and women alike, have been cruelly surprised in the night and taken off to the hills by bandits who are known for their ferocity. We demand collectively that there be a general mobilization of all troops in the districts affected, and that our nationals be liberated at once. If there is any failure on your part the question of compensation and sanctions will at once be considered."

He paused, out of breath, regretting that he had been tempted to help himself twice to such an excellent piece of Camembert only half an hour before. But this time he had drawn blood. The unexpected use of two words at this early stage had spread dismay which even discreet translating could not hide.

Compensation, sanctions, detestable words which meant infinite torture.

The vice-minister in the ceremonial Chinese long-coat, who had hitherto taken no part in the conversation, was roused by the protracted silence of his senior.

"Monsieur le doyen," he said in excellent French, "two details in regard to this sad affair (*cette affaire triste*) are perhaps unknown to you. In the first place our police on the train resisted valiantly and were killed; in the second

place all the passengers' effects were left on the train, proving that robbery was not the motive. Then a great many of our Chinese citizens were also taken off, proving that this blow has fallen on the heads of all unfortunates without distinction. These points are not without importance. If I may be permitted to say so, they gain in importance the more one considers them."

Two of the secretaries got up and most politely offered cigarettes and matches;—it was a hint that the interview had reached its normal end.

The dean, feeling that his reputation of a negotiator was at stake, refused to smoke with less than his customary urbanity.

"I am not concerned with details yet, since these are lacking," he said. "But I may remark that it was only with the greatest difficulty that I restrained my American colleague from coming independently of me, as not only are many American citizens involved but a great personality."

Everyone present looked alarmed.

"A great personality," they repeated blankly.

The dean nodded.

"Yes, a member of the family of the richest oil-producers in the world. You can picture to yourselves what the family will do. The entire press will resound with this affair. We shall receive the most urgent instructions in the course of the next twenty-four hours; and if nothing has been done by you in the interval I cannot answer for the consequences." Having said this he distinctly relaxed, conscious that it would be well to rest on his laurels.

On an inspiration he rose—almost before there was time to say more.

But as the whole company came to their feet, the vice-minister essayed one last word.

"We yield to no one, *Monsieur le doyen,* in the immensity of our regret, but speaking for myself and as one animated by patriotic feelings, there is an historical significance in the act which has been committed which should not escape you. These marauders represent an element which from the earliest times has been important. China has always been saved by her bandits; the dynastic histories are rich in incidents which establish incontestably the accuracy of this. From the time of the Yellow Bonnets in the Han dynasty it has always occurred that when the nation requires a corrective, it is the bandits who are the chosen instrument."

The dean had taken up his hat and cane.

"I have completed my task. Tonight before seven o'clock I shall have the honour of leaving an *aide-mémoire* here which will recapitulate what I have already said. The essential facts can be no different no matter what additional information arrives."

He drove back in his old motor-car with the defective engine, talking in a very animated way to his interpreter who had not uttered a single word during the interview. The interpreter did not fail to express admiration (as indeed he always did) of the way his chief had handled the issue. He understood well that he was taken more as an ornament than anything else to these rather ludicrous passages-at-arms called "verbal notes." He knew from long experience that when an affair was in its initial stages a good deal of zeal was shown; but that presently, in obedience to the traditions of international intercourse, when the accumulation of documents became so mountainous that only really skilled men such as lawyers could

understand the essential points, the matter would fall into the hands of the secretaries, who would do as they pleased.

The dean continued to talk in a magisterial way as the motor-car rocked forward over the rutted roads.

"Have you ever heard an argument such as the last one?" he exclaimed. "China has always been saved by her bandits! It is priceless in intercourse between governments. Imagine if I record that in the circular record to my colleagues!"

"It would be incorrect to do so. The vice-minister prefaced it by saying that he was speaking in his private and personal capacity," said the interpreter drily, glad to be able to score a point.

The dean gripped his gold-headed cane, which had been given him in the days of his youth by a fair admirer.

"China has always been saved by her bandits!" he guffawed, as if only now the exquisite buffoonery of the remark was dawning on him. "It is twenty-six years since I received my first appointment, but never in all my experience have I heard a similar observation——"

"But if it is historically correct?" inquired the interpreter challengingly.

"One does not quote history in today's business," said the dean.

"I beg your pardon, it is permissible," rejoined his subordinate.

"You are absurd," cried his chief, angrily this time. *"Taisez-vous."*

The secretary, having no interest in quarrelling, shrugged his shoulders; and now they drove in silence until they got back.

"Who are all these people? I expected to have time for

five minutes' nap," grumbled the dean, looking at the crowd at his door. "Oh, the correspondents. Well, I shall invite them in. Commence on the *aide-mémoire*. You have a sufficient grasp of the facts to make me a rough draft."

Now he greeted everybody with genuine amiability; for he was one of those who understood how much a man can be made or marred by what appears in print; and he was well aware that such a chance as had come to him should be properly exploited.

Inside the house they took their seats as for a conference more momentous than that of the morning had been.

"Mr. Dean, can you give us an indication of how you propose to proceed in the matter of the bandit outrage?" said a young fair-haired fellow with glasses.

"Certainly," he replied, busying himself first with securing that his servants brought in an adequate number of glasses and bottles, being a believer in the doctrine that if a thing is worth doing it is worth doing well. "Help yourselves, gentlemen. There is whisky, brandy, and beer."

He took something of a beverage which is still going strong and sank contentedly on to a sofa. With his glass in his hand and his eyes fixed solemnly on the ceiling he delivered himself in this wise:

"We have had our first meeting already, shortly after noon. Our second meeting will be at ten o'clock tomorrow morning. I have just returned from informing the Government that our unanimous decision is that failing the immediate release of the captives we reserve the right to take drastic steps ourselves."

"What kind of steps?" mumbled one of the scribes, who had made a shorthand note of these remarks.

"I need hardly say that in the initial stage at which we find ourselves at present it would hardly be politic to reveal all we have in mind," remarked the dean smoothly.

"That's the right stuff if they know how to play it up at the other end," murmured the same scribe somewhat cryptically, except for his fellow-craftsmen who knew from this that his despatch would baldly state that armed foreign detachments were being prepared for immediate action on the scene of the outrage. "What was the reaction of the Government to your representations and can you give me the names of those present? Spell it out, please——"

The dean obliged him; whereupon having his "lead" sufficiently accurate to allow him to relax, the ardent searcher after truth leaned back in his chair and emptied a glass of beer, murmuring that it also was the right stuff.

"If there is any other point I can enlighten you on I shall be pleased to answer any questions," said the dean urbanely, "although I confess that our knowledge of what actually happened is not very extensive."

"Oh, that's being covered at the other end of the railway where the people started from, names and all that," put in the fair-haired youth with glasses. "What we are after is the diplomatic dope."

The dean looked puzzled.

"Dope?" he repeated.

The other gave an unembarrassed laugh.

"That's the trade name for information; facts, interpre-

tation, anything that bears upon a subject, you know. It's just slang, of course, but I bet it'll be in the dictionaries before Christmas."

The British correspondents, hitherto outdistanced by their American colleagues, had been on the point of asking questions for several minutes. One of them now sat forward.

"I take it from your remarks, sir, that the attitude of the Government was unsatisfactory," he ventured diffidently.

"Bright boy, darned well put; you go up one," murmured the irrepressible fair-haired youth with glasses. "Now watch for the come-back."

The dean fixed his eye-glass firmly in his eye, and immediately dropped it again as he said:

"Unsatisfactory is perhaps too strong. It would be more correct to say that they were overwhelmed, being by no means satisfied that it is a mere matter of brigandage, and inclined to believe that it is a carefully thought-out political move to discredit the Government and bring about sensational changes."

Every pencil was scratching furiously. Each man, in spite of temperamental and racial differences, had realized that he was face to face with a great story which for weeks would allow him to scrap "the filler" so necessary in the long intervals between successive crises.

"How precisely do they arrive at this conclusion?" inquired the same quiet English voice.

"That I have not been told," said the dean with engaging frankness. "But I gather from the remarks made that it has been carefully calculated by the people behind the bandits that all the major Powers with troops here

will not rest content with mere excuses, if liberation is not immediately secured, but will themselves despatch forces in pursuit."

"Oh, holy word, let me get it down quickly," murmured the fair-haired boy.

"Are not the local authorities themselves despatching troops?" said the same questioner.

"I have demanded the immediate mobilization of all the troops in the districts affected."

"Aeroplanes too?" put in someone. "That's what's wanted. I was in a bomber for the duration, and if you want to see things happen they're the boys. I'll suggest that in my despatch."

"The idea is good," said the dean, in his paternal way, feeling that he was making as great a success of this last interview as he had of the two others he had had that day.

"There is one danger that should not be lost sight of," said the British correspondent. "If the brigands are surrounded by large forces of troops they may butcher their captives. Whereas if there is some negotiation as well, they will feel that it is not a case of life and death with them. Do you remember the Yunnan case, sir, when the authorities displayed too much zeal and all the French priests were killed because the brigands were completely surrounded?"

The dean became thoughtful. He remembered the case very accurately since he had been involved with the Vatican over it. Now he called to mind almost with confusion his words, which no longer possessed a magisterial sound, but seemed on the contrary exceedingly dangerous in that they might infallibly associate him with a wrong decision.

He took a sip of his whisky and cleared his throat.

"I hope you gentlemen have made careful note of my remarks. I said as clearly as I could that I had demanded the immediate mobilization of all the troops in the districts affected—nothing more and nothing less. The word I used was mobilization. The inference that I had lost sight of the danger to the captives by precipitate action is unjustified."

The British correspondent coloured; the American correspondents grinned. "Attaboy," remarked one of them irreverently. At this juncture the interpreter providentially entered the room with the draft of the *aide-mémoire*. He seemed considerably surprised to find the journalists still sitting in serried ranks; and he gathered from the constrained air of his chief that some incident had just occurred.

Officiously, he placed the document on the table. A telephone bell rang, and he picked up the receiver. "Certainly he is here," he said to some inaudible interrogation. "One minute, please."

Mechanically his chief put out his hand to take the receiver as if anticipating what was to pass.

"Yes, yes. How are you?" he replied, to his interlocutor. "Yes. I am very busy, of course. Yes, we are engaged all the time. What, tonight? Well, after dinner, say ten o'clock. Yes, table-stakes."

He put down the receiver.

"Gentlemen, I shall have to ask you to excuse me. I have to work on the *aide-mémoire*. It will be released to you at eight o'clock tonight. When there is any fresh development please call. I am always happy to do what I can for the press."

They filed out of the overcrowded room expressing

the view that he was a decent old bird, and that although he might not be great his drinks were good.

Already the "decent old bird" was seriously engaged, while his secretary waited. He had gone to his desk so as to work unimpeded, and he was using red ink for his corrections. There was not a word of the many which had been spoken in the informal discussion just closed which did not weigh with him; and when he came to the passage about the employment of troops he deleted every word with strong, swift strokes.

"Voilà," he said, throwing the paper to his subordinate. "It is much shorter now, and gains in impressiveness."

The door closed and he threw himself with a contented sigh into an easy-chair. At last, he was alone with nothing ahead, except dinner and a small game of poker—that is unless his colleagues bothered him. But that they were not likely to do since there was another full meeting scheduled for the following morning.

He commenced dozing—waking himself up by his own muttering. A curious problem it was—could it possibly be a political plot? He was sufficiently astute to know that the main quarrel of the people of the country arose from the fact that although the Government asserted authority over civil and military affairs it did not secure the population against foreign pressure or the exactions of local leaders. How could he possibly discover the truth—and was the truth worth discovering?

He was snoring now, in long, steady snores, a somnolent dean in all truth, exhausted by unaccustomed efforts.

That evening at poker he surprised the company present, who talked of nothing but the train robbery, with the remark that one of his main concerns would be to prevent the troops from acting precipitately. He said he had in

mind particularly the deplorable results which too much zeal had produced in the case of the French Catholic fathers in Yunnan.

Even M. Damian, who was at the same table, was suitably impressed by this foresight. He made no mocking remarks, but on the contrary congratulated his colleague on bearing in mind so important a truth.

IV

THREE o'clock in the morning. Bright starlight but no no moon. A long shuffling column spread single file over a mile of narrow footpath. On either side, walking in the fields, or over stony soil, flanking parties of bandits chiding and driving their victims forward. Eight miles perhaps had already been covered; but those eight were as nothing to the miles that were to follow as they penetrated into the hills. Now the track became worse. Native women, who had been taken with the rest, sank to the ground from fatigue, and were roughly beaten to force them to their feet again. . . .

Mrs. Briller and her niece, still clinging together, found themselves almost alongside Dr. Kettling, who was walking bare-headed, with his arms still bound.

"Oh, what a horrible thing to happen," she whispered to him rapidly. "I cannot possibly walk any more. I shall collapse and die. What does it mean? What shall we do?"

"I would help you if I could," groaned Kettling. "I have no conception what it means, except that we are being taken into the hills."

"Have they no compassion on women?" exclaimed Gladys, Mrs. Briller's niece. "Cannot it be represented to them that we shall be worse than useless if we die?"

"I will help you when I can," groaned Kettling again. "Try and struggle on until dawn. At dawn they will rest."

Dawn at last—a beautiful, peaceful day, with birds chirping in the thickets, and not a cloud in the sky.

The column had come to a halt instinctively; men and women were utterly exhausted and lay on the road-side. A great sparrow-hawk sailed overhead as if attracted to the grim possibilities on the earth beneath. The bandits clustered in large groups under their leaders, talking excitedly and pointing up the valley through which they were marching.

Gladys sat down and watched her aunt anxiously. She was lying down and had closed her eyes from sheer exhaustion, and the girl became a little paler from apprehension.

Presently a bandit came down the line with a bucket of water; people were using their hats and their hands to get a mouthful, although he had rough earthenware bowls with him. Gladys joined the little throng gathered round him; she must get water for her aunt.

Someone turned and looked at her. It was the man of the night before, Trent.

"Could you get us a little?" she begged. "This is such a dreadful thing to have happened that I hardly know what I am saying."

"I shall see that you all get water," he rejoined gravely. "I shall see if something cannot be done to help you all."

A minute later he brought her a bowl.

"Water, Aunt Edith, there's water for you," said the girl, kneeling at her side and putting the coarse earthenware bowl to her lips.

Mrs. Briller opened her eyes and drank.

"I was dozing," she murmured. "I thought it was all a horrible nightmare."

"We've got an hour to rest," said Trent.

"Only an hour," breathed Gladys.

"They think it too much. They're afraid of pursuit and capture. Everyone must make an effort and presently we may get them to relent."

"But I can't walk any more; I'm at the end of my tether," exclaimed Mrs. Briller.

"Aunt Edith," said Gladys gently, "you must try."

The bronzed, athletic-looking man nodded his head approvingly.

"I don't know if I'll be successful," he remarked, "but I'm going to tell them that you all will die unless you stop walking. They can get donkeys easily enough. The countryside is full of them."

He walked off.

"That's the man Dr. Kettling was telling us about?" whispered Gladys. "I'm sure he will succeed. If we have donkeys don't you think you'll manage?"

Mrs. Briller nodded.

"It sounds too good to be true," she murmured.

The minutes went by and the people still lay about on the ground. Groups of bandits were constantly going and coming; it was as if the whole countryside were full of them.

Then a sigh ran down the long column. Donkeys were being provided for the women; the bandits had seen reason.

"It's going to be better, Aunt Edith," said Gladys. "We won't have to walk any more."

Trent was coming down the footpath again. He had some of the hard native bread in his hand. He offered it to Gladys.

"It isn't as bad as it looks," he said. "It's worth trying—" He turned to Mrs. Briller. "Try it in very small

pieces. You've got to keep alive. They've promised us tea a little farther on."

"Where's Dr. Kettling?" said Gladys.

Trent looked surprised.

"Kettling—do you know Kettling? He's there, lying down. Not very well, I'm afraid." He pointed down the hill-side.

"Poor man!" murmured Gladys.

Trent turned and their eyes met in sympathy.

"Do you hear that whistling?" he said. "We've got to start. You'll have to ride the donkeys astride on the pack. Here comes my wife. She'll show you how."

Gladys smiled.

"We can manage that—anything to get off our feet."

On the morning of the second day the captives woke less desperate than they had been on the first. They had been allowed to sleep for ten hours and food of a sort had become plentiful. A good many of them had had money secreted on their persons; and money is the great magician of the East. A great deal of it had already changed hands, and the brigands had in some cases sold back to people their own belongings. Dividing themselves up into groups, a warm camaraderie had sprung up between all. Mrs. Briller and Gladys were no longer as miserable as they had been; by a great amount of talk and persuasion Trent had managed to secure for them the same special treatment he had obtained for his wife, who seemed clothed in an impenetrable reserve.

"It was lucky I found a roll of silver dollars instead of my revolver at the last moment," he explained. "I got them into my hip pocket in the nick of time, and they've worked miracles."

"I wonder how long it's going to last," said Gladys.

"They say their terms will be communicated in due course to the authorities," said Dr. Kettling gloomily. "There is more in this business than meets the eye. A lot of the men appear to be ex-soldiers."

"I thought all bandits were ex-soldiers," said the girl, watching Trent going slowly down a footpath to seek an interview with one of the minor leaders.

"Sometimes, but not always. Now we've got to start again."

On the third day they hardly moved at all.

"We are rushed off frantically during the first night and part of the next day," said Dr. Kettling solemnly, "and then suddenly listlessness seems to overcome the leaders for no reason that I can discover. We are certainly not twenty-five miles from the railway, which I am sure one could see from this elevation with a good glass."

He pointed towards the east, where the sea of low, barren hills gradually smoothed away to a great plain. Spread out in a loose encampment round a small village, the captives, although allowed their liberty, were most closely guarded. Armed bandits were posted in a great circle round them, and patrolled ceaselessly up and down. Beyond the first line was a second line, less dense but equally vigilant; and then far off on every eminence were still other pickets, some lying hidden beside their rifles, and others in full view watching every path. Not even a cat could have escaped.

Gladys sat thoughtful for a long time.

"It was lucky that my aunt had that little bag of hers," she remarked. "I feel pretty disreputable, but I don't know what I would have done without it. Any news, Mr. Trent?"

He had come up slowly and seriously.

"Nothing, nothing at all except that they are becoming insolent. I thought a Frenchman was going to be killed ten minutes ago. A brigand knocked off his hat and he promptly knocked him down, but instead of firing at him the brigands laughed."

"Good for the Frenchman," said Gladys, watching him gravely. "I wish they could all be knocked down and we make our escape."

"They're waiting for something, some signal, some word," said Kettling. "I'm convinced of it. I've caught snatches of their confidential talks; for although they're careful to keep their plans to themselves, they're constantly referring to someone whom they call the Frog. You know they have a mania for nicknames: everyone who is anyone has a nickname. Who is the Frog? That's what I want to know."

"A very suggestive name; I wonder if they've nicknames for all of us," said Gladys.

"That brings back something buried deep in my mind—something half-forgotten," remarked Trent. "The Frog! I could swear I've heard that someone was called that."

"Well, that's the first real clue I've found," continued Kettling. "Apparently if this person speaks the word everything will be changed and we shall probably be immediately released. The Frog is in touch with them constantly. They saw his signals last night."

"Released—will we really be released!" sighed Gladys. "I was laughing about it all just now, but now I feel like tears and I don't know why."

"Keep smiling," said Trent gravely. "Don't give them the satisfaction of seeing tears. I'm going to see about

my wife. She's in that hut next to Mrs. Briller. It's wonderful the way your aunt has braced up. Let me know if there's anything doing, Kettling."

Presently Gladys scrambled to her feet as Mrs. Briller, the Trents and several other people who had been in the huts came in a little crowd towards them.

"I hope your baggage is ready to be checked, Gladys," remarked Mrs. Briller humorously. "The orders are that we are to start at once. That rascal I gave a fifty dollar bill to has just slipped in and given us warning."

"I'm packed!" cried Gladys, waving a microscopic bundle made of silk handkerchief. "I only hope these brutes don't make us race for it the way they did that first night. Here they come——"

Instinctively, in spite of the gaiety they affected, everyone stiffened as a group of men armed with rifles came towards them, waving and shouting roughly.

"Don't do anything rash," exclaimed Enid Trent as Trent advanced towards them. But he had commenced speaking to them in their guttural vernacular and he did not mince matters.

"If we are leaving, a word is sufficient," he said. "Every time you advance shouting and waving it is frightening to our women. I have already said this several times."

"Who should care!" said one of the men insolently.

"You," rejoined Trent, eyeing him coldly.

The man broke into a string of oaths. He advanced and raised the butt of his rifle as if to strike. Trent continued to eye him coldly. Slowly the other dropped his rifle, whereupon Trent resumed:

"You can always strike one blow—just one—if you

are quick. Then you will be dead and everyone will be pleased."

"Wait a bit," cried the bandit, in a frenzy of rage. But Trent had turned his back on him, and the incident had melted into the numberless incidents of the day.

The convoy moved off in an immense, long, straggling single file, Europeans and Chinese mixed indiscriminately yet keeping spiritually apart. On both sides of the winding column hundreds of bandits were spread in a loose formation, with scouts far out on either flank who climbed every eminence and closely scanned the horizon in every possible direction. Occasionally a man with an old infantry bugle blew some discordant notes, but what the signals meant no one discovered.

Gladys, riding easily astride without troubling to put her feet in the stirrups, felt her spirits rise. Apart from the discomfort of the nights there was now not a thing that really troubled her.

"It's funny how a disaster like this makes one feel we've known each other all our lives," she said to Trent as he adjusted a strap for her. "How long do you honestly think it will be before something is done?"

"You can be quite sure they are tumbling over one another in their efforts to do something. We've probably been moved suddenly because something has already happened somewhere."

"What sort of thing?" put in Mrs. Briller, who was riding just ahead.

"Well—troops are in pursuit. You can be quite sure of that."

"Troops!" echoed Mrs. Briller in alarm. "That means firing. Heaven preserve us from anything worse than this. Troops! I don't like the idea at all. Imagine what will

happen to us if these men get desperate. It would be far better to pay them a huge sum."

Dr. Kettling, hobbling along painfully, looked at her solemnly.

"They don't want money, I'm sure they want something else. It's not a question of ransom. There's that bugle again."

The bugle was in point of fact sounding shrilly and discordantly from an eminence; and now another bugle answered it. A fresh, compact body of brigands, who had been resting in a hollow, suddenly rose to their feet and scampered off. Then a word of command passed along the convoy; and the brigands guarding the captives began hurrying them on with rough gestures. They were plainly making for a cleft in the hills which would take them out of the district where the outrage had been committed into another. The climb became steeper and steeper, and in spite of oaths and shouts and threats the speed of the column gradually dropped. Two Chinese women captives lay on the road and refused to go any farther; they would die, they said, but they would not go farther. Callously the brigands urged the column onwards. The woman lying on the road were left to be dealt with by the rear-guard which was miles behind.

"I say, this is getting nasty," whispered Gladys. "Do you think we are in any personal danger? I don't care about myself, but my aunt wouldn't be able to bear anything like that."

"They wouldn't dare to do anything with us," said Trent gruffly, because he was secretly concerned. "Poor old Kettling. I don't believe he'll last much longer."

Gladys glanced back; and with a cry, as she saw the expression on his face, slid off her donkey.

"Now, Dr. Kettling, I insist. Get on. I'm only twenty and I could run up this hill. They can't object if I'm willing. Get on. Get on."

They pushed him on against his will. At last they had breasted the steep incline and were in the gap.

Instinctively the brigands halted the column, as if they were satisfied that there was no longer any immediate peril.

Gladys stood staring at the rolling vista at their feet.

"Do you see those dots?" she said excitedly to Trent. "There—straight away to the left. Look at them, look at them, a long line. It's miles and miles away. I'm sure I know what they are. I've noticed exactly the same thing out in Colorado. A ranger explained to me why they looked like ants."

"What is it?" rejoined Trent, shading his eyes with a hand. "I can see nothing."

"Mounted men, men on horses, there, miles and miles away, just on the rim of the horizon," she exclaimed triumphantly. "There are dozens and dozens of them. Mounted men, cavalry, the pursuit has begun."

"You have marvellous eyes," commented Trent, staring hard. "I can see a faint something now and again, but nothing much."

"Our brutes have seen them," she whispered. "Look at them, gathering in knots and pointing. They have marvellous eyes as well. Now how long will it be before they catch up? It ought to be only a matter of hours."

"Hours?" repeated Trent incredulously. Then he remained silent because he did not wish to tell her that there were no such things in the country—that everything was important excepting Time, which was not armed with a scythe but was merely a bottomless pit.

Dr. Kettling was seated on a rock, wiping his forehead and talking to Mrs. Briller.

"That saved my life—I shall never forget your niece coming to my rescue."

"Relief isn't far off," said Gladys, coming up still as excited as ever. "I've seen them—the cavalry in pursuit—clearly, unmistakably. Look at our brutes. They are certainly upset."

Enid Trent, who was standing watching, turned with the same angry look in her eyes she had had from the beginning.

"I would like to upset them a little more. If only our men folk could get hold of some of their weapons—" She made an energetic gesture.

"I've a feeling they don't think very pleasantly about Mr. Trent already," said Gladys apprehensively.

Kettling nodded.

"If you could have understood their language during that last passage-at-arms," he murmured.

There was a general bustle. A young Chinese, who had been educated abroad, sidled up to them cautiously.

"I'm afraid these people are going to give us a bad time, if what I have overheard means anything. They've only been playing with us so far. But they're frightened now. They've got word the Government have acted with unusual promptness and set in motion every soldier in this part of the country. There are thousands closing in on us on every side. They cannot possibly get away. There's only one thing they can do."

"One thing," faltered Mrs. Briller, "do you mean kill us?"

"Oh, no," replied the young man. "But they're going to force us to the top of that inaccessible mountain you.

see over there. How all we can do it I don't know. There's a fort on top with water and supplies, and they will hold out there and bargain with our lives as the counters."

"Brutes," said Enid Trent bitterly.

The young man looked round apprehensively.

"They say those Chinese women who lay down and refused to walk have been allowed to escape, and that some of them are in favour of letting go all the women so as to increase their mobility. There's a chance for you ladies yet. As for us men, we've got to go through to the bitter end."

Dr. Kettling groaned.

"Unless they haul me up with ropes, I can never get to the top of any mountain—they will have to leave me at the bottom to die."

"I for one won't go and leave my husband," said Enid Trent heatedly.

"There's no question of that yet," rejoined Mrs. Briller.

The bugle was going and so was a shrill whistle. Slowly the brigands assumed their same formation, and commenced urging their victims forward. Violent scuffles took place; the brigands were resisted whenever they attempted to use force. Several of the prisoners were openly rebellious and demanded food before they moved. The brigands were plainly harassed.

All afternoon they toiled on, and when night came the rebellious movement had reached such a pitch that the brigands began separating the men from the women as an extra precaution. But in the midst of it all there was a sound of distant shots.

"The soldiers have come," everyone shrieked.

In the confusion a number of the Chinese captives slipped away, but the Europeans were more closely guarded. The brigands started firing in the air to show that they would not hesitate to shoot if anyone moved.

The three ladies stood together, profoundly distressed.

"This is dreadful," said Mrs. Briller. "We're on a mountain-side and night is coming on and we're separated from the men."

Presently some of the brigands came along and moved them near some huts.

"I wonder what's happening to the men," exclaimed Gladys anxiously.

She would have been more distressed could she have seen. For with infinite cunning the brigands had separated the men from one another; on one excuse or another they got them among dense groups of their people. Then, without any more concern than had they been dealing with live-stock, they seized them from behind and roped them before there was time to do anything. Kettling offered no resistance at all, but although Trent wrestled like a bull they soon tripped him and threw him. As punishment they trussed him up more tightly than all the rest, only releasing his arms for a few minutes when he was given water and bread. Then his arms were bound again, and so were his feet, and he was left under the guard of three men who commenced playing a gambling game on a rock.

V

For a long time Trent lay stock-still on his back. Gently he tested the leg-ropes; one of them was so badly tied that even a novice could have got rid of it. Now he commenced loosening the knots on his arms—with patience he was sure he could succeed. He had made up his mind to escape that night; if he could get away and act as a guide to the troops who were undoubtedly closing in on them, he would have everyone relieved in very few hours.

He racked his brains, as he glanced at the men shaking their dice on the rocks and enjoying themselves hugely, to account for the slowness of the pursuit and the mystery which enveloped everything that was happening. Once, when they had all asked to be brought before the leader of the bandits so that they might learn the terms of their release, they had been roughly informed that he was not with the band and that such questions would be dealt with elsewhere. Not an indication could they gain of what was going on behind the scenes; it was as if they had ascended to the clouds and were lost to the work-a-day world.

Almost guiltily he crossed his legs. One cord had come completely untied by jerking at it. As far as walking was concerned he was free. If he could loosen his arms, there would not be the slightest difficulty in his crawling away—provided he was willing to face rifle-fire.

Dusk had commenced to fall, and the brigands desisted from their play. They got up, yawned and walked to and

fro. He raised himself to a sitting position to test their attitude towards him. They paid no attention at all. There were the three ladies—he could see them indistinctly near the huts; and it seemed to him that they were making attempts to come in his direction but were being prevented.

His attention strayed. He wondered where Kettling had got to. They had evidently deliberately separated him from all the rest out of spite. Now that he had made up his mind to escape, his sense of indignity at being bound evaporated; he was completely indifferent to anything and only concerned about the future. Then, as he looked round again, to his amazement he saw Gladys approaching with a big bowl in her hands, and two armed brigands at her heels. He tried to affect an indifferent attitude, but the sense of indignity suddenly returned and a wave of colour stained his face.

"Poor you," she murmured in her sympathetic way. "After infinite persuasion we got them to allow me to come with this milk. It is good—quite fresh. They absolutely declined to have Mrs. Trent near, as they were afraid of a fresh scene and struggle. I'll help you."

She lifted the great coarse bowl to his lips to allow him to drink. The brigands stood near making rough remarks, but they did not interfere.

After a few mouthfuls, still keeping his head bent over the bowl, he murmured rapidly, "Try to loosen the knots on my right hand. Stand more in front of me so that they can't see. Use one hand."

An expression of surprise crossed her face, but she contented herself with giving an almost imperceptible nod. Then deliberately she tilted the bowl so that she spilt some of the milk over him.

"Oh! I'm so sorry," she cried loudly, making a great

to-do of the incident and wiping his coat with her handkerchief. Quick as lightning, as she was doing this, her fingers tugged at a knot. Three times she was unsuccessful, but on the fourth attempt he suddenly felt the cord loosen, and he knew that he could do the rest.

"Enough, enough," he murmured, bending down over the bowl which this time he emptied completely.

Thereupon at once she made off, exhibiting the empty bowl to the brigands as proof that her task had been accomplished.

Trent dropped back on the ground and watched the stars slowly appear one by one as the daylight vanished. It would be fairly easy now if he had any kind of luck, he thought, wondering once more about the strangeness of it all and grateful that he had obtained such providential help.

When he opened his eyes again it was pitch-dark; but his guards had fetched a great pile of brushwood and had lighted two big fires, which served the double purpose of allowing them to cook and watch their captive. The rest of the encampment had apparently already sunk to sleep. The mountain night, although cool, was not cold; and even if his limbs were a little numbed, he was not conscious of much discomfort.

He moved his head cautiously to see if there was anyone behind him; and he received a distinct shock to find that a brigand had spread his bed-roll not more than ten feet away. It was not going to be as easy as he thought, particularly if any of them kept awake throughout the night. He tried to remember all the tactics adopted by those who had been captured during recent years, but he could remember nothing that seemed helpful. It was himself against a callous world.

About one o'clock in the morning he rolled up the single blanket they had given him so as to be ready. The camp-fires had burnt low, and the bandit behind him was sleeping soundly. He waited listening for a long time before he actually started, but at last satisfied that all was well, he gently began crawling away.

The camp lay scattered down a cleft in the hills through which ran a tiny stream. On the opposite side of this rivulet was a very steep hill. The top of this range was the objective which he hoped to reach before daylight. The quickest way would have been to go along the banks of the stream; but as he would have had to pass through the bandit lines, he decided on climbing the almost vertical hill.

He went as swiftly as he could. Never looking back, he passed the last camp-fire,—almost running into it as it was nearly out. But the men around it were either soundly asleep or drugged with opium, and no one stirred.

He crossed the steep little ravine and immediately came to the face of the precipitous hill. To his consternation, it was covered with a dense growth of small bushes. Slowly, using his arms almost more than his legs, he worked his way up it diagonally; but his progress was so gradual that it did not seem that he would ever reach the top. After frequent rests, he found that the best way to subdue the terrors of that climb was by moving almost flat on his face. In this posture he struggled on hour after hour. Several times he thought he heard a great hub-bub in the camp, whose fires he could see sparkling beneath him. But after each alarm these noises died down, and through unending efforts he finally reached the summit.

He had hoped for some sort of a view, even in the

dark, of the valley below. What was his despair to find that directly beyond lay another hill, steeper, if possible, than the one he had just ascended. Its dim outlines towered against the sky, a barrier strong enough to dishearten the most resolute. The ravine between the two hills was in inky darkness and he was unable to tell anything of its nature.

Excitement, the absence of pursuit, and the hope of freedom had until now combined to keep up his spirits. But now there was only desperation left.

He slid and clambered down the slope with his teeth set and an iron determination to win through.

At the bottom of the hill there appeared to be a precipice; and immediately above this a sandy slope, so steep that only by exercising the greatest care could he move along it on his side without slipping down.

He worked up this ravine for a long time until at length he determined to cross it. He selected a point where he thought he could see the black tops of trees growing at the bottom; and then, without hesitation, let himself go.

It seemed to him that he was travelling to eternity. He had collapsed on soft, moist turf, where he lay for some time completely exhausted and dazed. Realizing suddenly that dawn would soon appear, he made a spasmodic effort and clambered out of the narrow ditch to find that in front of him was the second hill. Great boulders were strewn on it, and round their perpendicular faces it was necessary to work very slowly and carefully. At that moment despair entered his heart; he would have given almost anything to have been quietly transported back to the bandits' camp. For many minutes he wrestled with himself; then the wave of weakness passed.

He rested as long as he dared, even taking out a piece

of native bread and gnawing as much of it as he could swallow. This part of his flight must have been done mechanically; afterwards he could remember little of it except that he had a definite feeling that he must not exert himself unduly at any moment.

Suddenly he found himself at the top of the second hill without realizing it.

Grey light appeared, and he saw that he was standing on a narrow ledge. A few steps along this showed him in the growing dawn that he was really on a goat track leading round the face of the hill. His relief was so great that he broke into a sort of a staggering trot.

The path led past great boulders until it came out on grass land with large flat patches of slaty rock. Below him lay a little open valley so far removed from the brigand camp that it belonged to another world. He had accomplished the impossible and put an impassable barrier between him and all pursuit.

He went down the smooth, steep hill-side at a great speed, often sliding on his back for many yards. At the bottom he saw a great pink band of light across the head of the valley. Sunrise had almost come; he must hide.

The moment he attempted climbing again to reach some cover which lay only a hundred yards ahead, his legs gave way completely and he collapsed. By desperate efforts he reached some low bushes and, chiefly by the aid of his arms, pulled himself into a thicket where he lay motionless for a long time.

This rest gave him a certain amount of strength. He strained his eyes and ears to discover if there were any signs of pursuit. Except an occasional bird, or a rustle in the undergrowth as if small animals were stirring, there was not a sound. Getting to his feet, he made his way

as quickly as he could through a pleasant woodland slope towards a crest a mile or more farther on where he could see some huts.

He had evidently begun to get a bit careless; for having got out of the thicker cover he happened to look back; and his weak nerves received a severe shock. Only a quarter of a mile away, bobbing along the path, was a line of stiff bamboo villagers' hats, such as were used by many of the brigands as a protection against rain and sun.

Instantly he dived into the nearest cover and lay quite still, hardly daring to breathe. He remained in the same cramped position for nearly an hour until he had become so stiff that he feared that he had lost the use of his limbs. He was continually hearing in his imagination someone creeping towards him. He knew he could not resist the feeblest assault; and this agony on top of all he had already experienced was almost too much for him to bear. Yet nothing happened.

After a bit he sat up and peered cautiously in every direction.

In the continued silence his confidence began to return. After another half hour he began to creep forward again. Once or twice he heard very distant shouts; but as they did not seem to come nearer he continued on his way. At last he reached a clump of trees. Here he reclined, well hidden. With the sun shining on him his clothes, which had been soaked from the dew, gradually commenced to dry. Although he was badly in need of food, he felt so contented that the great strain seemed over for the present.

About midday he determined to push on. But as the country was fairly open and as he had no doubt that the brigands had watchers on all the surrounding hills, he found it nervous work. He could hear very far off the

sound of shots, and he came to the conclusion that the band must have set out again. For a long time he kept a careful look-out, and then seeing nothing living at any point on the landscape, he boldly began walking.

In another hour he had successfully dropped down to a little hamlet hundreds of feet lower than the hill country. In a hut he found two peasant women, from whom he managed to procure some eggs which they cooked in a broken iron pot. His throat was so dry that he could hardly swallow; but he had become so used to his wretched condition that he felt little thirst.

It was nearing sunset when he pushed on again. By dusk he had reached another collection of huts at the head of some stony fields. The people here were not very friendly, but he secured from them more eggs which, after boiling hard, he ate, drinking much hot water to relieve his throat. Then, having procured some straw from an old man, he lay down and tried to sleep.

Though utterly exhausted, his nerves kept him from resting, and he spent a miserable and sleepless night. He re-lived in a frightful nightmare all the bitterness he had gone through. His aching limbs gave him a sense of torture which his brain confused with something long since passed, and he was chastised as with points of fire. Time pressed on him as if it were a great weight, and the skein of life seemed twisted round his throat like an assassin's scarf. Figures passed endlessly before him, and in his half-dream his hands were still brutally tied. The girl who had untied them danced before him—and in the distance, faint yet clear, was the vision of his wife standing by a hut.

Before dawn came he could stand it no longer. He set off by starlight across the stony land.

Daylight came suddenly and mercifully. A little after five o'clock he reached a small village at the edge of a great valley he had already seen. The prospect ahead of him seemed beautiful after all he had gone through. There were lightly wooded hills and thickly cultivated fields and an occasional temple. His voice, he found, had nearly gone, and he spoke in whispers. He rested here in a house till after eight o'clock. With great difficulty, owing to the suspicions of the people, he procured the services of a guide, but they would not give him a mule or a donkey to ride.

Once more he set out in the direction of the railway.

The road lay fairly level, with only slight rises, for several hours. Then a steep hill rose in front of him. Although he had managed to drag along at about two miles an hour on the level, he found that he could only just manage to climb this eminence with the aid of a stick. Toiling wearily up this last steep incline, he saw a figure staring at him fixedly at the top from behind a tree. Though he hardly dared look a second time he realized that the man had a rifle in his hands, and that a sardonic smile wreathed his lips. Intense chagrin filled his breast that after his extraordinary exertions the brigands had found it possible to reach this spot in time to head him off. Yet he observed that the man made no threatening motion nor did he move his rifle; he seemed to be talking over his shoulder to someone behind.

He stopped, out of breath, and his tired eyes suddenly realized that there in front of him was a little tent with half a dozen soldiers. He tried to cry out, but the sound he made was only a whisper. The men conversed in undertones but made no move towards him—they watched him, indeed, as if he were a ghost. He staggered up to

them, looking round for his guide who had fled. Then he pointed to his throat.

After that they gave him some hot water, which he drank greedily, and they led him down to a small village close by where a company of infantry was billeted. Here he was received with open arms by a junior officer who readily acquiesced in his request to proceed at once, even giving him an escort and a pony to ride. This was fortunate, for he could not have walked much farther, having reached the utmost limit of his powers of endurance.

VI

Gladys, after she had left him, had walked back slowly to the line of huts.

She did not immediately approach the others, who were sitting on boulders waiting for her, because she was aware that many eyes were watching. Her heart was beating fast from apprehension. Trent would make a desperate attempt to escape the very instant he thought the chances good—perhaps even before it was dark. She was convinced that the bandits would not hesitate to use their arms; and it would be a miracle if he succeeded in getting away alive. At any moment there might be a storm of fire, and she was in terror about it. Yet she determined to say nothing either to her aunt or to Enid Trent. The eyes were still watching her; she had no means of knowing how much of what she said might be understood owing to their uncanny powers of intuition.

"Well, he got his milk," she said at last, as casually as she could. "The brutes didn't pay any attention to me at all after they saw that I was determined."

Enid looked at her thoughtfully.

"Do you think they would drive me back if I tried again?"

Gladys shook her head.

"If they've done it once they won't hesitate to do it again. They're evidently afraid of scenes. They know

who you are. They somehow seem to know who we all are——"

"What a set of barbarians they are," said Mrs. Briller. "You'd have thought that at this stage of their history they would know better than to have done this to a lot of women."

"Better!" echoed Enid bitterly. "They will never know better."

She stood staring steadily in the direction of her husband. It was growing dusk so rapidly that it was difficult even to make out the small knot of men who were gambling on the boulder; as for Trent, he had dropped completely out of sight.

"There must be a way," she murmured, more to herself than for the others.

"Perhaps he's thought of it already," said Gladys in a subdued voice, feeling that she should say something.

Enid gave an exclamation. Then the two women looked at one another almost as if they had never really perceived one another until then; a long, searching look it was from two pairs of eyes, a look with a touch of apprehension and a touch of surprise and a shade of jealousy in it,—a very important look.

"Is that what you think?" said Enid.

"Yes," replied Gladys, very calmly. "I think he's found a way."

The other woman slowly nodded as if she understood, and breathed deeply; but she did not speak again.

Gladys crossed her arms and watched her thoughtfully.

In the train the story Dr. Kettling had told had seemed distant, irrelevant, almost a fairy-tale. Now it had assumed capital importance, illuminating this woman,

throwing light on every little daily incident, making her reticence understandable. Did she always veil her purposes, and did she ever think of the other man—what was his name, Scott? Perhaps a stroke of genius had made her pick on someone with monumental reserve; Gladys had never met anyone as reserved as Trent, as able to keep his own counsel. Perhaps he was indifferent to women, perhaps he never thought of them, perhaps this one had just forced his hand, and in indifference he had accepted the situation which had been made for him. Yet when she had run one finger delicately and rapidly over his wrist to satisfy herself that a wound the cord had made was not deep, he had thrown her a sudden look which somehow told her that what she had done was uncustomary in his experience. That small and insignificant thing had become imprinted on her mind—it was like a signal flashing out on a far-away landscape. It was all very difficult to understand.

Enid had not moved. She was still standing with her hands folded, as watchful as ever of what was going on over there a few hundred yards away. The brigands had lighted a watch-fire in preparation for the night, and one of them was busy throwing on brushwood which raised clouds of sparks before it burst into a bright flame. The figures in the distance looked a little unearthly in that light, and the three women watched them, fascinated. They were like demons in some slow phantasy—people not of this earth. Their silhouettes were too willowy to be strung with resolution; they seemed like shades, easy to drive back into some infernal region.

"There may be many shots," said Enid suddenly, as if during all this time she had been meditating on the prospect of the night. "A long fusillade there may be——"

"And if there is only one shot?" said Gladys, thinking of what one shot had once done, and watching this woman who had dared so much.

"It will mean that the escape has failed," replied Enid coldly, without looking at her.

They stood silent after that as if the subject had been exhausted. Gladys went up to her aunt, who took her by the hand.

"Another day gone and they have done nothing to relieve us," said Mrs. Briller, a little querulously. "Do you think it can go on like this for many days?"

"No, I don't. I feel somehow that we are on the eve of developments. Don't fret about it. It has turned out better than I supposed it would."

Mrs. Briller shook her hand and commiserated with herself.

"A woman of my age having to go through such an experience! Taken from a Pullman car, rushed through the country, thrown into a dirty mud hovel, with no proper food, no bedding, no privacy. . . . I don't see how I've stood it. Just look at my hands, my clothes! We are disreputable, deplorable, disgusting."

Gladys laughed.

"I'm certainly not a thing of beauty and a joy for ever myself, but really we have been lucky, and by and by we shall declare that it was a most romantic and exciting experience."

"Romance—there's no romance in it for me."

Gladys patted her hands.

"Do you know what Dr. Kettling told me the last time I was able to speak to him—that the only thing which killed romance was responsibility. I've been trying to think what he meant."

"He's in love with definitions," said Mrs. Briller grimly. "Now what's that mean?"

She stood up nervously. A cracked bugle had rung out in the night air, and there was a bustling which spread to the men in their immediate vicinity. A word was shouted down the line; two brigands approached and signalled to them that they must go inside the hut. Mrs. Briller gathered up her skirts in as dignified a manner as she could and walked in without a word; Gladys waited to see what Enid would do—she was sure it would be something unusual.

She was not disappointed. She had gone up to the two men and said something haltingly in the vernacular. They gave a rough laugh; but they were not disobliging. With the butts of their rifles they smashed in the one high window of paper and wood in the hut and pointed to what they had done.

Thereupon Enid gave a sharp nod and walked in while Gladys immediately followed her.

"At least we'll have some air," she said.

The rough door was closed behind them; and as an additional precaution a heavy boulder was sent against it with a crash.

Mrs. Briller gave what sounded almost like a moan.

"It's all right," said Gladys reassuringly. "They are only making sure that no one will steal us." She gave a forced laugh. "It's the first time we've been treated like this—separated from the men and made to feel that we are in a dungeon."

She felt rather unaccountably on the verge of tears. The idea of being imprisoned was certainly unpleasant, and the gloom inside the hut added to a feeling she had never experienced before.

Out of the darkness Enid's voice sounded as calm and as dispassionate as ever:

"I looked at my watch before we came in. It was then nearly eight o'clock. Daylight will be here soon after four. We have only eight hours—a working man's day. Mrs. Briller, come over here. There's a raised platform where you can lie down. I will show you how to make yourself comfortable."

They began helping one another. Presently Mrs. Briller dropped off to sleep just as she was declaring that she would never be able to sleep again; and the other two began conversing in low, drowsy voices. Gladys felt an odd fascination in this interchange in the dark in such unusual circumstances, and remembered every word for ever so long.

"Is there any danger to us, do you really think?" she asked. "Would they dare to do anything bad to us?"

"No—they're afraid of white women. I don't say that bad things have never happened, but that has only been in times of general terror."

"General terror? You mean revolution?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"Then, of course, it was horrible. Read some of the books. This is nothing like that."

"Why have we been separated?"

"There's some new move. This is a symptom. Perhaps we're going to be released."

"It seems too good to be true."

"If they let us go, it will be because we have served our purpose."

Gladys sighed.

"Are there no good actions in this country?"

"Only by mistake. You see, I've lived here for ten or twelve years. I've no illusions left."

"Ten or twelve years—what a long time? Do you ever regret it?"

The answer sounded more sharply—and Mrs. Briller stirred uneasily as if she had been awakened.

"What an odd question. I've got a husband and two children—these are not matters for regret. I never expected to stay more than a year when I first came out. But then most women commence like that; they only begin to think how long it's been when they're old."

Gladys remained silent for some minutes after that. It was rather a strange answer, she thought; but it had a touch of sincerity about it, and it was wistful, too.

"I suppose it doesn't much matter where one lives as long as one is happy," she said aloud, at last. "That is, if one did not change. Doesn't one want different things at different times? You see, I'm only a beginner and I want to learn what mistakes to avoid."

"There are no mistakes—I'm sure of that. One is always wanting different things—we're acquisitive by nature. It's mainly a question of courage—one ceases being able to dare, that's all."

Courage—she made courage the central issue!

"I wonder if you're right. There are many things I would dare to do, but one is taught too much about the consequences."

"I never think of consequences," said the slow voice.

Gladys longed to see the expression on her face after she had said that. But in this gloom there was nothing to do but to listen to her voice—the voice which she had read somewhere was the last thing in the human frame to surrender to time.

She wanted to continue this conversation; so now she said:

"I can see a bright star through the window you made them tear down. It's so bright that when I hold my hand up I can see my fingers move. Look!"

There was a moment of silence.

"That's our star," said Enid.

"Our star?" repeated Gladys, mystified.

"Venus," came the laconic reply.

The girl was impressed. This seemed to her the most revealing remark of all. Everything in the visible world bearing a definite relationship, everything playing its part, even the stars; that was her conception of life. At such an hour it had something pagan about it.

"Astronomy must be useful—particularly on a dark night," she said aloud. "I hope Mr. Trent knows a lot about it."

"He does. To him the sky is exactly like a book. He's exactly like a sailor. He can get anywhere on the darkest night. A great traveller, you know. That improves his chances——"

Gladys gave a little shiver.

"I had almost forgotten. If I were you I should be so desperate. I couldn't sit still. I believe a shot would make me scream."

The voice that answered her was as calm as ever.

"What's the sense of screaming—it might even give some of them satisfaction, make the brutes feel that we were frightened. Besides, my husband will not fail. He will not make his attempt before he is absolutely sure. I have seen him in tight places before. It will be pure ill-luck if he gets hit. There—there's a gun now. Do you hear? Those are the outposts shooting to show that

they are on the alert. If they fire at him, it will sound right under our noses. Do you mind if I don't talk any more? I'm going to try and get a bit of sleep beside your aunt."

Gladys, left to her own resources, moved slowly until she was in a corner where she could sit on the ground and lean her head against an angle of the wall. She wondered whether the other captives were as well off as they. She had counted fourteen foreign women the day before. They had been divided up, partly on account of food, and partly because the brigands were so numerous that they preferred to occupy a number of hamlets. Some of the other women had acted rather disgracefully, making scenes and weeping; and she was glad that they had been left alone. She had not seen Dr. Kettling during a whole day and she reflected that she might not see him again. She felt a great desire to talk to him. But perhaps he might vanish as Trent would vanish—vanish, vanish like a star. . . .

She felt her head nodding on her shoulder. Twice she dozed off and forcibly woke herself up. Then, without knowing it, she was flat on the earthen floor and almost at once soundly sleeping.

How long she slept she had no idea. But she awoke to find that the patch of sky visible through the broken window was not black, but grey, ever so grey. Distant firing was audible; it was far away, so far away.

She sat up with a start.

"Oh, dear," she exclaimed, suddenly realizing that it was Enid very close to her. "I've slept half the night and I meant to keep awake. Why is it so grey up there?"

"Daylight," said Enid laconically.

She was plainly visible, now, standing in an attitude

which showed that she was intently listening. The very distant firing had become more faint, but she did not speak until it had entirely disappeared.

"Well, he's got away," she said, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Got away!" cried Gladys, springing to her feet. "Are you sure?"

Enid looked at her without a smile.

"As sure as one can be of anything on earth. Those fools were blazing right and left like madmen for an hour, which means that it's all over by now. Now I wonder what's going to happen to us. They're shifting the big stone."

The door of their hut was indeed being opened; and as it fell back they saw Dr. Kettling with a group of armed bandits. He peered in, trembling from excitement.

"You're awake already! I have come with a wonderful piece of news. You ladies are to be released at once. There is no explanation—you've got to start now—as soon as you can. The others have already commenced going down the hill-side. You will be taken straight towards the railway, and left as soon as you are near the soldiers. Trent has apparently got clean away. Dear, dear, what times!"

"We're free, really free," exclaimed Mrs. Briller incredulously, "and Mr. Trent has escaped?"

"And what is going to happen to you?" cried Gladys.

Dr. Kettling made a deprecating gesture.

"We who are left are to be taken to the top of the unscalable mountain—until the bargaining is over. There has been active bargaining for two days, that they now admit. I am very much afraid that I shall never be able to get up any mountain, so it may be more than *au revoir*."

"It is an outrage," cried Gladys. "Can't you get them to leave you here?"

"I'm afraid it can't be done, I'm afraid I must go with the others. Good-bye, good-bye; these men are displeased that I am talking so much."

The tall, precise figure turned, and the brigands pressed forward with signs. Almost at once the three women were hurried down the hill-side, where they found the donkeys. Without a morsel of food they were hastened across the foothills to a valley where, surprisingly near, they saw the flags of the soldiers and the glint of bayonets.

The rest happened swiftly. Their passage through the cordon of troops, with crowds of odoriferous men pressing round them, their long half-day across an unfruitful soil seemed a dream; then, growing up amazingly and incredibly, the railway again, with many trains on the sidings and many people speaking to them in their own language, and officials of their own, and food, hot water, rest—marvellous rest on a train that took them with the utmost care to the end of their interrupted journey, and deposited them in the Capital.

VII

General Wang, smoking a foreign cigar, was standing at the entrance to his tent, busily thinking.

A dirty mountain village straggled up towards the little eminence where he had pitched his headquarters; and along the single street his soldiers were idly passing to and fro.

The difficult and elaborate game into which he had plunged had made no progress. True, he was encamped fifteen miles farther into the hills; and in place of his whole brigade he had now only a battalion of infantry and a battery of mountain-guns with him, the rest being scattered in a thin line throughout the countryside with flags marking their positions. But that was all. Although he had the culprits bottled up, and was in a position to put them out of action at any moment, he had been expressly ordered by direct telegram from the Government not to do so;—he had been told in no circumstances to engage the brigands unless they attempted to break through.

Why? This interrogation, which he was unable to answer, obsessed him night and day. Something was going on behind the scenes which he was unable to fathom. He felt he was lost because he was in the dark —he felt that someone desired to reap the profit and prestige which rightfully belonged to him by effecting the release of the captives. It was quite plain that that order

had been given on someone else's advice; and he longed to know who it was.

He stood morosely watching the Rat approach, carrying two baskets. Gifts of this sort reached him continually, a proof that his star was looked upon as a rising star by the humble people among whom he lived. In the past he accepted every present with a smile and a wave of the hand—as much as to say that when the time came he would not forget. Each man's name (and what he had sent) was duly entered in a blue account-book which he carried in his unbreakable tin trunk, that record being as valuable as a weather-chart in a countryside where sympathy meant success. But now he suddenly realized that this was nothing at all. The big things were elsewhere—not among a peasantry who scarcely numbered one rich man in every ten thousand. He might spend his whole life fruitlessly unless he somehow made his way out of the country districts into the towns. It was strange that he should not have realized this before; it was as clear to him now as a bright light.

Mechanically, as he thought in this vein, he followed his orderly into the tent and stood, not speaking a word.

"From the village elders for your kind acceptance," said the soldier cheerfully, squatting on his haunches beside the baskets and enumerating the contents as he unpacked them. "Forty hens' eggs, twenty ducks' eggs, four parcels of cakes, twenty catties of macaroni, and four ducks already roasted. There is also some tobacco such as your Honour does not use."

He paused with the packet in his hand and his eyes on his chief's face. Then, at a signal, he slipped the tobacco

into his own pocket, since that was one of his time-honoured perquisites.

General Wang now emitted a lordly grunt which might have signified anything to the rest of the world, but to his familiar meant, "Why was this sent?"

"Outside the elders are waiting; they were following me from afar," remarked the Rat promptly.

"Show them in, show them in," said his general, yawning but buttoning up his tunic which had been unbuttoned.

The orderly called loudly and authoritatively:

"Come, come!"

Forthwith three village elders, weather-beaten and grey, with their best long-coats on as on a ceremonial occasion, stepped forward and bowed three times.

General Wang waved his hand towards the baskets.

"You treat me too much as your guest—this is too much —quite unnecessary. I come to protect the neighbourhood by order of the Government, and your village shares in the general protection extended to all."

"Without you we might perish," said the three elders sententiously.

"My actions are without merit. Have you been molested recently?"

"We have paid our customary contributions," replied the village elders. "No harm has been done to us."

"You are lucky enough," said General Wang, who was perfectly familiar with the way they purchased immunity. "On the plains there has been much trouble. The bands have carried away hostages and taken women, too. Have you unmarried girls in your village?"

The elders remained silent. Their shrewd old eyes searched the face of the speaker as if they wished first

to know the drift of his remarks before committing themselves.

"There are three daughters who have been promised in marriage," said one gravely.

"Three!" cried the officer jocosely. "You have great festivities in store. Have you any requests?"

One of the three drew a long envelope out of his sleeve and presented it with both hands. General Wang took it in such a way as to indicate that he would read it later.

"It is about two young men from our village," explained the elders. "They are in your Honour's great army, and we crave that they be released."

General Wang frowned.

"Which arm?" he said gruffly.

"Artillery," said the three, quailing.

"The artillery! This is hard to grant. To learn the guns is not easy. I have but a small force that is trained. Your request is refused."

He paced angrily up and down the room, as if he were irritated beyond words by such a thing occurring when he was in none too good a mood.

The village elders glanced at one another. Then, without hesitation, all three knelt, not with meanness or in terror, but ceremonially, with their arms stiff beside them and their long sleeves touching the ground, whilst their eyes were steadily fixed on the figure in military uniform.

General Wang was mollified; the anger went out of his heart. The supreme appeal had been made to him, the appeal which made him mightier than any other living thing in that neighbourhood at least—and at that particular hour.

"Rise, rise," he exclaimed. "What is the difficulty? Speak without fear. I shall consider the matter."

The elders did not rise, however. From their knees they spoke, sometimes one, sometimes another.

"It is concerned with our land. . . . It is necessary that our farming be carried on with equal division of labour. Hitherto that has been done from generation to generation, without fail. But when last year these two became soldiers the equal division failed. Quarrels resulted; our village, which has been united for two hundred years, has become disunited. If another harvest goes by without the customary contribution by each family alike, there must be sub-division of the land and starvation for some. Our prayer is that these two be released; we shall simultaneously find substitutes who have been trained in the artillery."

General Wang pricked up his ears.

"Ho-ho—so you understand the business of troops as well as tilling the soil! Where will these two who are to replace my men come from?"

"From the military governor's force," said one of the three in a quiet and significant way.

General Wang scratched his ear as if he appreciated the finesse of that.

"How soon can they come?" he asked, after a moment's consideration.

"They are here," announced the village elders. Then, as if they had won their point, all rose from their knees almost simultaneously, and one went to the opening of the tent and called.

Two soldiers in a strange uniform entered and saluted.

General Wang was overcome by surprise. Yet he commenced forthwith this interrogatory:

"What arm?"

"The artillery."

"Length of service?"

"Three years and four years respectively."

"Do you come from this village?"

"We come from the next one."

"Are you on leave?"

"It is like that——"

"If I required more trained soldiers from your corps, could I obtain them?"

"They could be obtained."

Whereupon General Wang took the petition in the big envelope from his tunic pocket, approached the small table, and with some difficulty wrote the single character "Granted" on it, placing his big seal beneath it.

"For the Staff Office," he said to the Rat. "Let all go to the Staff Office and arrange."

Without a word all trooped out, leaving the tent empty once more.

Now General Wang dropped into his canvas chair where he so often lolled and smiled to himself. He began calculating how he would go to work. If the military governor's artillerymen gradually deserted to him it would be a great thing. This was truly a lucky happening. But it was guns he needed almost more than the men; guns were more precious than rubies ever since there had been an international prohibition preventing their free importation. Well, well, a useful hint had been given to him; and foolish indeed would he be if he did not take advantage of it at the appointed hour. There must be a revolt in the military governor's Yamên. The men must march off with all the artillery. He would incorporate them in his own corps after declaring that this had proved the only method to prevent a worse disaster; for had it not

happened before that whole corps had marched off with their guns to the hills and joined the bandits?

He ate his dinner at the door of his tent, thinking all the time how he could best provoke a deliberate revolt; and the thought increased his pleasure in his meal. He must certainly finish with the countryside; the countryside was very well for a commencement but not for great things. It was the towns that were important—yes, the towns.

It was April, and the evening was almost balmy. The night air, faintly scented with the odour of growing things, made for peacefulness. He gave a grunt of satisfaction as he let himself relax. He thought of what coming months should bring, and his smile became more pronounced. He had learnt the lesson that audacity was the only thing which brought results—he must push his audacity to the utmost limits possible. Year after year he had seen the audacious succeed and the timid disappear. There was practically no limit to what a man might do. He wondered how he might best proceed with the military governor's troops.

Then something new caught his attention.

Several shadows had detached themselves from the night and were coming towards him furtively, but he did not speak. His sharp eyes speedily identified them—they were women; two old women and three girls, with their hair still braided.

"Well?" he remarked interrogatively, staring in his surprise as they came towards him cautiously.

The two old women stood almost over him before they spoke. Then they said in guarded voices which sounded like whispers:

"We were told that the great general lived his life

in loneliness. We were told that continuous travels from one place to another rendered it difficult to maintain family relations. Now we two are the matchmakers of the village, and our elders have said that the time is not unpropitious to arrange a match. It is for your Honour to decide."

The three girls stood in the starlight as if that was all the light a man requires to select a mate. But General Wang hardly glanced at them. He said indifferently, although he was tempted to laugh:

"They have mistaken my meaning, your elders. I had a casual comment, but it was not meant like this. Are these three promised in marriage?"

"Even so," replied the old women. "But if your Honour cares it can be arranged."

He laughed at that—now he could not restrain his laughter.

"I would be a good one with one or more women following after my camp. . . . No time to attend to my men, no time for anything, not to speak of children. Old ladies, there was no such hint in any of my talk. Begone!"

Just as they had come, so did they vanish, noiselessly—suddenly, as if they had never been there at all.

After that he stood undecided for a moment; then he went to his tin trunk, unlocked it, and took out a writing book adorned with ideographs. He mixed the ink on the ink-slab and with immense effort began doing what he did daily, practising handwriting so that one day he might be able to write. Doggedly, with no pause at all, he did the amount he set himself to do; and when the page was completed, stopped and wiped his brow, and spent a minute or two looking over the book to see if he

was making progress. Then he slept as he always did—lying like a man who has been pole-axed.

He was up at daybreak, and in an hour or two had finished most of his work. But this time, before he was quite finished, they came running to him with a message which had just come from an outpost several miles away. The news was surprising—all the women had been released by the brigands and were passing down the mountains towards the railway.

He walked off scowling to turn this over in his mind. Things were certainly taking place that were not to his liking. For what reason had the women been liberated? Plainly a plan thought out by someone else. And here he was chained to inaction because he had communicated directly with the Government, and the Government had deigned directly to answer him.

"Nothing good will come out of this," he muttered to himself.

"How can it come?" he repeated derisively.

He was minded to retire his whole force. He sat deeply pondering whether that would be an effective move. But instead he detached men to go to the nearest railway-station so that he might know every single soul who was waiting there, and who was deemed most to have the matter of the relief in hand.

It was the next day that the surprising thing happened.

A group of cavalry at a walk came into sight with a captive—a foreigner who sat on his pony almost doubled up. In a few minutes the sergeant in charge was reporting to him the facts—how this man had come staggering up a hill, and how they had taken charge of him and done what they could.

"Can he speak our language?" interrupted the chief.

"He can speak."

"Bring him here; I will question him myself."

Forthwith Trent hobbled in, stiff and sore in every joint; his head bound up; his face swollen from cuts and bruises; his hands in a deplorable condition.

General Wang bowed to him politely.

"You have had a hard time," he remarked. "I feel my responsibility. It is with difficulty that I can look you in the face. Our country is very blameworthy. But I hope you will not suffer ill-effects. Please be seated. I have ordered food. Then we may talk and I may see how to act with my troops."

He pushed forward his canvas chair, looking curiously at the tall man and wondering how he could turn this to his advantage.

Trent let himself drop into the chair with a groan. He sat so still that the other came forward with his quick, sharp steps.

"Unwell—very unwell? We have a doctor in the camp," he remarked. "He has been employed in a foreign dispensary. I will summon him immediately."

Trent opened his eyes and closed them again.

"It is nothing," he said, in a kind of soliloquy. "Just fatigue. I rolled down the hills as I was afraid to crawl. . . . When day came I had to lie without moving. The second night was like the first. I crawled and rolled repeatedly. My strength is nearly gone. I need sleep."

General Wang nodded understandingly.

"A bed shall be prepared. But after so many hours without food you first must eat." He called loudly and the Rat and another brought in trays loaded with food.

"You are too kind," remarked the fugitive.

"The food is poor enough, plain camp food," rejoined the officer, "but I have something to drink which is better." He fetched a bottle, and very naïvely poured out a half a cupful of whisky.

"*Wei-ssu-kei,*" he said, pronouncing the word in the native way and showing the label. Now his eyes twinkled as his guest drank. "That is better, eh?"

Trent began to eat, and the officer made conversation.

"How many were left behind?" he asked.

"A hundred or more."

"Were the brigands cruel?"

"They were not pleasant."

"Ah," he exclaimed, "had I not been stopped from attacking by order of the Government I could have effected release two days ago."

"Why was there such an order?"

"I cannot discover."

"Perhaps it was the fear that we might be hurt."

"No harm would have been done you. Still, I do not know. Will you now have hot water?"

A basin was rapidly filled. Very slowly Trent unbound his head and took the rags off his fingers. Now he stood in his torn trousers, hitching up a belt of kangaroo leather, with a curious metal clasp, which he had had for many years.

He had dipped his face in the water when he heard such a sound of excited exclamations, cries, and gasps that he turned, amazed. There was the officer at his elbow examining the belt, calling out an endless string of remarks.

"What has happened?" Trent exclaimed, blinking his eyes because the water was running into them.

"You do not know me?" cried the other. "You have

completely forgotten? At once would I have known you without that cloth on your head, without your growing beard, without your cuts, without the strangeness of the meeting-place. But the belt I can never forget. Many years it is since I coveted the belt—and nearly stole it! Can you not guess?"

He stood with his eyes sparkling and his mouth wide open. His emotion was so great that he sweated profusely, the perspiration streaming down his face. Suddenly he resumed, as if unable to contain himself:

"You cannot guess, so I will for you; I am the one who ran away to be a soldier."

Trent gave a great exclamation, reeling a bit because of the raw whisky he had drunk.

"What, this is little Wang, the boy who was once with me?"

"Yes, even so," replied the other, "I'm the one called Wang. The ninth I was, although the others are all dead. I was fated to be a soldier. . . . Now I am general of this brigade. . . . Incredible. . . . Never has such a thing happened before. Now be seated——"

They stood together, both laughing, both amazed. They talked in snatches, breaking off suddenly, commencing suddenly, mixing it all incoherently together, but understanding one another.

Presently they became quieter.

Each had something uppermost in his mind.

"This is a sign that my bad luck has broken," exclaimed General Wang again and again. "For with your help it will indeed be easy."

"All our people over there in the hills will be speedily liberated, too," said Trent. "As soon as I have had one

night's rest I will guide your men back and in a few hours it will be successfully ended."

To this the other said:

"This is a complicated business; we must not too rapidly decide. I have my orders. If there is firing I shall be blamed. Besides the brigands have a purpose. It is not a question of ransoms. They have certain terms."

"Then I will go elsewhere for help," said Trent, suddenly displeased. "I cannot delay a single day."

His host threw back his head and laughed.

"If you go elsewhere they will promise everything and do nothing. It is such as I that have the power." He thumped his chest.

"My wife was there—I cannot leave my wife," said Trent.

"The lady was with you?" This in an amazed tone.

"And many others. How can I abandon these?"

The other loudly laughed.

"Well, they are prisoners no more! They passed our posts many hours ago."

Trent jumped up as if to go.

"Is that true?"

The other pushed him back into his seat.

"Yes, but what reason is there to hurry? They are safe. I guarantee it is true. They were seen by our post, and their talk was that all the women had been liberated. You may telegraph. But let us first talk. Such a time as today will never return. Let us drink to it—let us drink!" He poured out whisky into cups. The colour was in his cheeks; the strong spirits and the excitement had so heated him that he had unbuttoned his tunic and loosened his belt.

"You see, we have never met since that night when they nearly burnt the Capital ten years ago and more. Do you remember how I appeared that night with my file of men?—ten I had, then, and no more. It was in the first year of the Republic and now we are in the twelfth. I had no training at all then, and small knowledge. Many years it seems now, like under a cloud—" He passed a hand over his forehead—"I remember the other foreigner, your friend, *Ko-to-ling,* the thin man with glasses. He spoke our language like a teacher. Does he still live? After that I was on the Western frontier where promotion was good. I became a company commander, but six years more passed before I got a battalion, having no influence at all. But I had fighting experience and good luck—only one wound in the hand." He exhibited his left hand which had only three fingers. "Each time there was fighting I had luck—and I took what I could."

He talked on, absorbed by what he was saying and half drunk from the unaccustomed spirits he had swallowed in honour of the day. Trent watched him with sleepy eyes. Sometimes he even dozed, his head falling to one side.

Safe, the women were safe.

"Our people are ruled by fear," General Wang was concluding; "a threat is not enough, neither is justice. It is necessary to strike. In the town and in the country it is the same. To make them afraid is necessary. You understand?"

"What I wish," said Trent, hardly listening to him, "is the rescue of a single man, the tall one with glasses, my friend *Ko-to-ling.* Perform this act and afterwards I shall not forget."

"It can be done. One can I have released—if I pay in cartridges. Now if you will write, I will have it sent, and the price shall be paid."

Later General Wang dismissed his orderly and sat cross-legged in the dim light, with his hands on his knees.

Any ill-humour he may have had over this affair of bandits had vanished. He suddenly realized that the rest of the business would have little or no importance. Let them go on with their negotiations, their promises, their payments. This exactly suited his plan. It would end in the military governor being punished by dismissal; there was not the slightest doubt about that.

He pushed the whole thing out of his mind and began thinking about what this foreigner could do for him.

Now that he had let him into his secrets he was sure that he would get something practical done; he believed implicitly in the white man's power to produce solutions.

He looked at the sleeping Englishman. He had said that if he would come to the Capital, he would take steps to arrange what he had asked for. Certainly he would go. As soon as this affair was out of the way, he would quietly slip off.

A new thought came to his mind. He moved quickly to his precious tin trunk, the key of which he carried on a little chain round his neck. He unlocked it and looked in. His reserve was in there, a sum he had taken from others in the fighting; foreign banknotes, a few gold bars, a mass of national bonds which had once been looked upon as waste paper.

He got them all together and tied them up in a piece of blue cloth. He would hand them over to his old master and get him to place them safely in a foreign bank, so

that he would have something behind him when he commenced to talk business.

They made quite a big bundle. As he stared at it, he reflected on the caution he had displayed all these years in keeping what others had rejected, and waiting for the appointed hour.

BOOK II

THE PRISONERS IN THE CITADEL

I

"Have you quite recovered from all your fatigue and anxiety, Miss Cunningham?" said that shining diplomat, Monsieur Damian, very politely. Thereupon Gladys turned and looked at him in such a frank and friendly way that he was touched.

"It seems ages ago," she remarked. "All you good people have made us forget. But I'm thinking of the others. I think of them all the time."

Monsieur Damian nodded.

"It is a matter of hours for them all to be released. We have been waiting all day for telegrams. The terms have been arranged; there's no possibility of things going wrong. We have insisted on negotiations and forbidden military pressure for fear of what the bandits might do to the captives."

"I'm so glad," she said fervently. "You've no idea how harrowing it is to be in those mountains."

They were all gathered at a little dance which had been arranged as a sort of celebration for their deliverance. Trent and Kettling had only arrived back in the Capital twenty-four hours previously, having remained some days with the relief-parties seeing that food and clothing were sent to the captives, together with messages to hearten them.

Trent had been beseeched by everyone to give in detail

the story of his own sensational escape, and of the way he had managed to get Kettling set free. But he had made very little of it. "I did nothing," he said to everybody. "I climbed up one hill and rolled down another when they were all asleep. I reached the soldiers in less than forty hours. There's no story in that. As for Kettling, I was lucky enough to meet an old friend who was in touch with the brigands, and I got him out for a consideration."

"I couldn't believe my ears when I was told I was free," Kettling had said. "I asked them what they meant, but they merely bundled me off at once without ceremony to the first soldiers, who brought me to Trent. Trent's very mysterious about his part in it."

Gladys thought of all this as she sat exchanging little comments with Monsieur Damian, watching the gaiety and showing little inclination to dance although young men perpetually hovered near her.

"You know, it's perfectly wonderful just to sit still and feel comfort around one," she explained. "I feel I don't want to do a thing. I just want to eat and sleep and be lazy."

"I can understand," said Monsieur Damian. "I would feel just the same, I assure you. Still, I think you ought to dance. Why don't the young men come forward and ask you?"

"They're afraid," she rejoined, "afraid of offending ministerial dignity and being put on the black list. Isn't it that? You know what young men are——"

"They have changed in their methods since my time, although not in their tastes," he suggested. "And that their taste remains good, I judge by the way they hover near."

She brushed the compliment aside.

"Won't you tell me what I ought to go and see as soon as we've settled down?"

"I've got to know what you like first. Temples bore some people terribly. Others want all the history they can get, as fast as a motor-car can travel. This Capital is like a woman with a past—only the very young and the very old can tolerate her."

Gladys smiled.

"I want a car, I think, and I want to see everything."

"That means the Summer Palace; and endless temples and the Hall of Classics, and the Sacred Edicts engraved on stone, and the chair the emperor sat in when the wise men lectured to him. It takes at least a month, and you must never do more than one thing a day."

"Do you give everyone such excellent advice?"

"I'm not sure. Generally I give no advice at all. Sometimes I offer an opinion."

"Why so reserved?" inquired Gladys, who was eager to find out more about this city.

He became confidential—and indiscreet.

"It's only natural, I think you'll agree. I am a little out of sympathy with it all—I mean the life here. My fellow-countrymen are in the minority, we're hardly a handful—you see it's English. The English are a very fine people, but somehow I am never at ease with them. They are too nonchalant for me and at the same time too much on their guard. As for the women, although they are sentimental and have hearts of gold, they imitate the men. I know what you are going to say—that I'm disappointed about something."

"I'm not English," said Gladys, wondering whether he

was trying to draw her, "but I do not agree with you."

Monsieur Damian looked at her shrewdly, as if he knew what she had thought.

"They say all people are really alike and that it is only the surfaces which are different. I disagree with this, except that it is true that some surfaces, being harder, take a higher polish. I don't know why I am talking like this. I hope you are not offended."

"Why should I be? I'm learning something about the place."

Monsieur Damian looked down.

"Will you stay long?"

"We are planning on a couple of months, but someone told me that that sort of plan was very common, and that one often remained on until one became old."

Monsieur Damian's eyebrows went up.

"Who could that have been? It was certainly no one in diplomacy. There—you have made me curious. What were your first impressions on seeing the city?"

"It made me think of a glorified Bastille. Such monstrous city walls."

He nodded approvingly.

"And we the prisoners? Better and better still. It impresses the native race that way, I'm told, at least those from the South. Perhaps it was designed with that object in view—they are expert at psychology. Somebody once wrote that the wall round our diplomatic quarter made it a ghetto! I foresee that you will find much to interest you. How did you get on with the Trents during your captivity?"

"We became good friends," said Gladys, wondering a little at the question.

"It is not easy to become good friends at a time like

that," he suggested. "I mean when one is feeling miserable and poor-spirited——"

"Is friendship only a thing of easy times then?"

"Yes—I should say so. In its initial stages at least. I am speaking impersonally, of course. I imagine Mrs. Trent must have been none too easy to get on with. She has a will of her own. There she is—coming to speak to us."

Enid, accompanied by several people, came up talking gaily.

"You *are* exclusive tonight, Miss Cunningham. I haven't seen you for ages. Your aunt has been asking after you. What have you been doing all this time? Beware of Monsieur Damian—there is nothing he will not attempt. And don't believe a thing he tells you. Do try to get to my table at supper."

She passed on, her quick eyes already interested in something else.

Monsieur Damian watched her until she was out of sight. Then he remarked:

"It is extraordinary how some people talk on without waiting for a reply. Do you think she is good-looking, or is it merely that she is extremely well organized—wears the right things and has an eye for colour? You see, I am always wondering about things—it is the only way to live in a place which has nothing to offer."

"I think you are making yourself out worse than you really are," said Gladys.

"I assure you I'm not. Now I'm going to leave you. Here comes the other part to the problem—Trent."

He went off with a little bow as Trent came up, leaving Gladys with the thought that he had implied something which she could not even guess.

With an effort she smiled.

"How are you now? Isn't it funny to think that a week ago we were struggling with fate and wondering if we would ever get out of it alive?"

He nodded and rubbed his wrists.

"I can still feel the rope—in my dreams. And I have never even thanked you properly for what you did. You deserve all sorts of nice things. I must try and get you a little souvenir."

"Nothing of the kind," she objected, beginning to forget Monsieur Damian. "You did really have a hard time, didn't you? I thought of you all that night and fell asleep listening for rifle-fire."

"It was a bit rough," he confessed. "I nearly threw up the sponge twice. But I had determined to get away, and it is astonishing what you can do if you hold on long enough. Then I had luck. I was taken to the tent of a general who used to be a stable-boy of mine many years ago."

"What an extraordinary story that was," she said, not realizing until later that this was the boy of Kettling's story. "What did he do? Did he fall down and kowtow to you? I have no idea what happens in a case like that."

"He came very close to it. He was extraordinarily excited. I could have got him to do anything. He knew that you had been released, but I wouldn't believe him at first. We talked for hours and hours. He told me all he had done and all he proposed to do, and the only thing I asked was that he should secure that Kettling was set free. He promised and he was as good as his word."

"I must see him," said Gladys. "It sounds like pure Arabian Nights."

Trent laughed.

"He'll be with us without fail—he's coming to see me very soon. He has a theory that if he can only arm himself properly he can do great things."

She looked puzzled.

"Arm himself?"

"That's his way of putting it. He wants to get in touch with people who can get him something better than the next man. There are countless people in the country, and not enough arms to go round. I promised to help him."

She looked at him thoughtfully.

"It seems stranger and stranger to me every day. Everything is so contradictory and doesn't go the normal way."

"That's only a first impression," he objected. "It's all very commonplace."

"Don't disillusion me. The world I see is utterly strange. Fancy brigands being as careless as our brigands were. Fancy a dozen great Governments being utterly perplexed the way ours were. Fancy your doing what you were able to do and finding that the general in command, who could have terminated the whole business in twenty-four hours, had reasons for remaining passive. And fancy on top of it all that he was no one else than a former servant. I don't know really what keeps things going here."

"Energy," he replied, bringing his hands together. "The superior energy of a few, that's the secret. A few have got it, and that keeps the ball rolling. If you're interested in this sort of thing you'll find lots of people to talk to you. But don't believe all they say because everyone romances; it's in the air."

"Dr. Kettling's reliable, isn't he?" she inquired.

"He's as faithful as a dog. Would you like me to introduce some of the young men? That was what Enid sent me here to do."

When she finally got home her aunt had long ago gone to bed, and she had the sitting-room with the magnificent view to herself. They were on the fifth floor of a tall hotel with an uninterrupted view across the Forbidden City, with its vast vermilion walls, its glistening marble courtyards, its mysterious yellow-tiled roofs. Going to the window, she threw back the shutters and gazed out.

Dawn was not far off—the sky had lightened perceptibly. In that pause between night and day this cyclopean work, which it had once beggared the whole empire to erect, seemed to carry an imperishable message. She gazed at it, absorbed.

Daylight was coming faster now; imperceptibly the shadows were disappearing. It was time to sleep; yet she felt no desire for sleep.

Below not a figure moved; the great marble courtyards were utterly deserted. Elsewhere there might be movement and life, but here was a city of tombs—the home of a lost cause.

She breathed the fresh morning air and thought of all the night had brought. What curious conversations, what interrupted confidences; how restrained everyone seemed after the freedom of those days in the hills. But they were prisoners here, Monsieur Damian had suggested. The great walls and the weight of the past did that.

It was curious how certain words found a niche in the brain.

She closed the shutters and went softly to bed.

II

Having settled his public business, made full provision for the military needs of his men, and scattered promises as plentifully as the fabled autumn leaves of Vallombrosa, General Wang began to think of his private affairs.

The great bandit outrage was finally over and almost forgotten. The bandits, having obtained the political pardon which they were seeking, suddenly released the remaining captives, marched down from the mountains, and were duly formed into a battalion of regulars. And the provincial governor, having been duly dismissed from office for being so incompetent as to embroil his country with foreign nations, handed over his seals to a new appointee who was responsible for the terms of this settlement, and who was in high favour although he could neither read nor write. This man did not receive very favourably General Wang's application to expand his brigade into a division, saying that until he could assemble the necessary equipment such a move was premature.

General Wang was furious. Equipment and ammunition—were these the real masters? Those who were far-sighted enough to arrange that they were better armed than their peers, had they victories in their pockets? Very good; he would show them. He ground his teeth and cursed the new appointee. He was worse than the one he had assisted to drive out; he was so foolish that he was digging his own grave before he was even firmly in the saddle.

He thought of these things as he drew off his uniform and clad himself in plain civilian dress. He thought of them still more when, with no sign that he was a man of war except that his orderly, the Rat, was still at his heels, clothed as of yore in field grey, with a big Mauser pistol in his belt, he bought a ticket and boarded a train.

Purposely he went in the second-class so that he would remain buried in obscurity. For in the coupé cars there was always a chance that there would be other provincial warriors such as he, with as much private business to transact as flourishing merchants, who would be quietly visiting the Capital to maintain their liaison with the wire-pullers and learn what prizes were likely to come on the market. It was customary for these, whenever they spied a colleague, to send their orderlies with their cards so that they might gossip together like lawyers who were not quite certain of their briefs, and who had a certain professional interest in knowing how it went with the rest of their kind.

Alone, therefore, with his thoughts, and with the Rat camped attentively near him, General Wang sketched to himself once again all he required, and thought of the artifices he should adopt to get the maximum credit.

For cash was his trouble—hard cash. The more he had, the more he spent; not on himself, indeed, but on his men. His brigade was a model brigade; he had picked up in one way or the other everything that ingenuity could suggest so as to give himself a military advantage. He alone among brigade commanders had range-finders and signal-lamps and field-telephones, together with an unprecedented number of machine-guns that literally ate up ammunition. He remembered the day when he had leaped with joy on obtaining his first machine-gun—a

German gun straight from the Belgian battle-fields, by way of Antwerp. That was four years ago—no, it was five. He remembered, too, how a whole battery of mountain-guns had fallen into his hands during a battle for the office of President fought by several generals at the gates of Peking; how he had immediately used them, realizing the overwhelming value of artillery.

Ever since he had fretted, particularly after he had seen how some were now equipped with heavy howitzers that could blow a house to the ground five miles off. That had revealed to him that he was only half-way up the ladder. He was determined to get to the top. Everything was so shaky that a nimble-footed one like himself possessed a priceless advantage.

He dozed as the train lumbered on; he dozed through the long hours. He forgot the fatigue of travel in his dreams—his rich dreams in which women and wine never had any place at all, but only power. He lay as if asleep until he bustled out of the train at his destination.

Then, with the Rat behind him carrying his modest bag, he irritably waved away the crowd of inn touts who besieged him, assuring him that they had accommodation fit for such as he, in spite of his protests that he was going to a friend's.

Yet outside the station he paused and wondered where he was really going. There was only one piece of business supremely important to him, and that matter could not be attended to that day.

He stood and reflected—as if he were really waiting for someone to turn up. The Rat, confused by their irruption into city life after the profound peace of a provincial camp, blinked his eyes at the electric lights, and felt his pockets to be sure he was not being robbed. His

commanding officer, looking round suddenly at him, emitted a hoarse word—a motor-car was to be called.

The Rat started forward and bawled in true military fashion; instantly, from the great press of vehicles, a rattletrap conveyance puffed up.

General Wang indicated his destination; he had selected a foreign-style hotel immediately outside the foreign quarter so that he would be only a stone's throw away from those with whom he wished to do business. Having duly arrived at this delectable hostelry, he opened his bag, took out a letter long written, in which he briefly informed his old master that he proposed to call upon the next day at eleven o'clock and sent it off.

Punctual to the minute the next morning he arrived in the lane where he himself had once lived. He was on foot; and although he walked fast he found time to glance in every direction. Ten years and more had passed since he had set foot here; he counted the years slowly in his head and noted all the changes.

"It is not the same," he murmured to himself. "They have even changed the name. It is 'Sheep's Tail,' no longer Mutton Lane. Yet it is the same, even if it has changed."

He stood puzzled in front of the entrance of Great House. Something had gone here—this was quite different. Why had *To-lan-to* (as he called Trent in the native phonetic) done this. Perhaps even the two big stone lions had disappeared. He remembered how he used to climb boyishly up them and treat them with contempt. Where were they now? They had even put in a foreign gate.

Then he looked across the street towards the old lumber-merchant's house. The forest of timber, which

had once been a land-mark, had disappeared. The twisting street looked flatter—yes, it had changed, or else his eyes were different.

He rang the door-bell.

He was admitted by someone he had never seen before, and there beside the stone lions he saw playing two foreign children, a boy and a girl. He remembered how *To-lan-to* had taken to wife the widow of the one who had shot himself. And these were the fruit of the tree.

He bowed to them as he passed because he belonged to a ceremonious race, but his thoughts remained a medley. New influences, new interests everywhere; he felt resentful because his sense of the past was so strong. Ten years had gone by, he said to himself again; now those years passed in quick procession as he had lived them in his rough camp-life, lieutenant, captain, major, colonel, general, always fighting for his own hand—always attacking an embattled world. And these others, who dwelt in the cities, had also had their battles; their fortunes had risen and fallen.

"Your master is in?" he said abruptly, to the servant who was standing there.

"He is waiting; I will lead you to him."

He followed the man, throwing still more curious looks. Changes—many changes, much vermilion paint. He could hardly recognize the position of the old buildings, the scene of his early adventures. Several times he paused and murmured to himself almost in distress; then he had to dismiss it all from his mind. For there was *To-lan-to* standing in riding clothes almost exactly as he had stood ten years before; and beside him was *Ko-to-ling* (as he called Kettling) exactly the same excepting that his hair had gone white.

"A pleasure, a pleasure," he cried in the vernacular, bowing deeply over each hand. "You two gentlemen have not changed now that I see you here, even though there is so much changed in the street."

"You did not lose your way, did you?" said Trent quizzically. "You remember the old lumber-merchant opposite on whom you used to play so many tricks? He's been dead these many years."

"Dead! He's dead? Well, he was old—seventy years and more. If he had lived his mind would be wandering. After sixty men only repeat the things of their youth, and no real hope lives in them. Is the house untenanted?"

"No, the widowed daughter lives there."

"Widowed? So she married and her man died! A widow? Many changes indeed. I have been noticing it ever since I entered the lane."

They had been talking on the steps of the new building; now they went in.

"As soon as I received your letter," said Trent, "I communicated with a friend who will be here shortly. Kettling will remain to assist, as this other one knows not a word of your language. Your money is safe in the bank, your bonds have been sold. The figures are here."

He went and got various papers. "You see, it is all in order."

General Wang's eyes flashed with amazement and his mouth remained open.

"I have that amount of money? Impossible."

"It is even so. The cash was not so much, but those papers you picked up as booty were very valuable indeed. They were Government bonds issued to foreign banks."

"It is good," said General Wang, recovering his com-

posure. "It is very good, in fact. Much is due to your care. I am greatly protected by you."

He sipped a cup of tea and let his mind roam. Half a million, fifty *wan* of dollars! He had never got as high as that before. He saw the scene which had been enacted years before when with a troop of cavalry he had overtaken the baggage-train of a fleeing general. . . . He remembered the panic of the transport-drivers; how they had abandoned their teams which had rushed into the fields, overturning their wagons and spilling silver ingots and dollars as the cases splintered. His men had plundered as much of the silver as they could carry; but he had taken for himself all the banknotes and the papers tied up with them, feeling that they must possess value to be carried off like that.

And now they had proved magicians, conjurers of wealth which could wheel artillery into action for him.

Half a million. . . .

He took a deep breath and thought deeply.

Then he rose and walked round the room, staring at the books in the book-cases as if they puzzled him. How much could he get with the money at his disposal?

"Can I bargain?" he said abruptly, in the vernacular. And seeing that the two looked puzzled, he added: "Not about these books. I am thinking of your friend. I am only thinking of that. Will he lower his prices?"

"You had better first see what he has to say," said Trent.

"I see him coming," said General Wang, standing squarely with his legs apart and his hands behind his back. "I see him coming——"

"Yes—that's Shardun," said Trent, looking out of the window and then going to the door.

Shardun, an immensely powerful man, a veritable giant, was hastening up through the garden. He was smoking a long cheroot, which he cast away as he sprang up the steps.

"Not late, am I—where's the victim? That little fellow over there? My men have all my gear and samples at the gate, but I won't spring them on him until I see whether he's going to bite. Ah, General Wang, very pleased to meet you. I hope we'll do business."

General Wang had come forward with placid unconcern. Shardun extended to him a hand which he shook. But his interest was more aroused by the fact that it was the only hand the tall foreigner had.

He pointed to the empty sleeve. Whereupon Shardun said briskly:

"Tell him that's a bit of Gallipoli. I jumped back just half a second too late, with the result that I made them a present of one arm. Funny how every general I've ever met out here is worried about it." He turned and called to his interpreter, who was standing at the door: "Come in, Micky, nobody's going to eat you. He's so timid about this arms business he thinks he's going to be arrested every time he puts his head in a doorway. Make yourself pleasant to the general, Micky. It's good for business to smile. Introduce yourself, man, to your fellow-countryman."

Thus apostrophized, the interpreter, a tiny individual furnished with big horn spectacles, went up noiselessly to General Wang, who looked at him contemptuously.

There was a muttered exchange of words, like the thrusting of sword-points. Then the interpreter, having completed the ordeal, shrank back into his corner.

Shardun seated himself and crossed his legs. He was

wearing shorts, and his powerful knees seemed the key to the man.

He lighted a new cheroot and considered General Wang with an amiable smile.

"Now, Kettling, or Micky, or someone who understands the lingo, please tell the general I have done business with them all from Szechuan to Manchuria and that my terms are strictly cash. I deliver the goods. I expect cash."

"No, no," said Trent. "You've been out long enough to know the value of creating the right atmosphere. You don't want a storm at the start."

For answer the one-armed giant, with amazing dexterity, unbuttoned an inner pocket and began taking out blueprints, which he tucked under his armless sleeve or held in his mouth until he had found what he was looking for.

Then, swinging himself to his feet, he spread out on a table his papers.

"Here you are—the very thing. I only landed these yesterday. Two batteries, Japanese eighteen-pounders, limbers and everything complete. Used in the Russian War—re-lined and passed O.K. Ammunition easy to obtain, as you only have to send across the Yellow Sea. What does the general think about these? I will throw in fifty shells per gun if he comes to terms."

General Wang was at his elbow, listening with keen ear whilst the diminutive interpreter translated in an endless flow of words. Soon enough he cut him short.

"How much?" he inquired, with telegraphic brevity.

Shardun consulted a piece of paper and told him. Whereupon General Wang walked away and sat in a corner by himself. He was understood to say that the

price quoted was forty per cent higher than the old market price for Krupp batteries.

"Tell him you can't get that stuff now," protested Shardun. "Tell him the difficulties are increasing all the time; there are all sorts of people to pay, losses by seizure, all sorts of new things. It's hades getting the stuff into the country, although why they shouldn't be allowed to blow each other up if they want to, I can't imagine." His talk was unending, but General Wang did not weaken. Krupp prices or none at all.

"Done," suddenly roared Shardun, throwing the packet of specifications over to him. "Done at the old price, just to oblige him and make friends. Now let me work this out."

He held a piece of paper in his mouth and fumbled for a pencil. While he was consulting a pocket-book, he kept up a running fire in English: "Don't mind my country manners. I hope I've laid the bait in the right way. This is just an opening hand. I'll stock him up so that he can blow a hole straight from here to the Great Wall. Going to start with howitzers next. Got some beauties, and then the surprise packet, the big surprise at the very end. Regular problem play, with the last act the crowning act of all. Make yourself at home and talk to him, Kettling. Make the atmosphere."

Kettling crossed to General Wang, who politely rose.

"Is he honest?" inquired the officer bluntly in the vernacular, indifferent to the propriety of such a question.

"Honest!" echoed Kettling, in amazement. "All foreigners are honest."

"Then why does he change his prices like that?"

"He is a dealer—he seeks to make a substantial profit for his risk and trouble."

"A profit is a profit," grumbled General Wang, "but he cut his price forty per cent because I knew what Krupp guns were selling for years ago. I am on my guard. I shall haggle over everything."

"What's he babbling about?" said Shardun in English, looking up from his papers. "Does he think I've been trying to soak him? Disillusionize him, Kettling. The game's hardly opened yet. Here, Micky, write out the translation of all these figures, and don't make any mistakes either. Now I'm ready for the next lot—howitzers."

He came across the room with a pile of blue-prints under his mutilated arm, and commenced explaining them.

"This is a job lot, a bit of everything, but all of it is good of its kind. Two French 155's, a couple of Italians, a Skoda gun—an old make but very powerful. Now look at the prices. I've positively cut everything down to the bone, and these are absolutely the last figures."

They clustered round him while he explained and expounded; and there was a rapid cross-fire of words. General Wang went over everything several times before he committed himself. Then with a sudden exclamation he said:

"I will take everything, but with ten per cent off for cash tomorrow morning."

Shardun looked for a minute deeply offended. Then he appeared to change his mind.

"Done," he exclaimed suddenly. "I lose my commission but I'll do the business. You can get delivery within forty-eight hours. I've everything snug in a concession not a hundred miles from here. Now this is all preliminary canter. We're going to get down to brass tacks."

He walked to the door, pulled out an army whistle, and

blew a shrill blast. General Wang's mouth remained open from amazement.

"Tell him to excuse my country manners," said Shardun genially, hitching up his shorts with his only hand. "That's for my gang at the gatehouse. They've got the real goods. Now we'll get down to business." He blew again. "That's the worst with this blooming race. Let any of them sit down for a minute and they think they've turned in for the night."

Down the pathway his men were nevertheless coming. Two were carrying an enormous Gladstone bag; one a kit-bag; and a fourth a canvas roll.

Shardun took delivery at the doorway and dumped each package on the ground as if it were only a feather-weight. "Now, get out. When I want you again I'll whistle. Savvy?" He closed the door securely. "You don't mind if I lock it, do you, Trent? This is my stock-in-trade, and I don't want people secretly shroffing everything I've got."

General Wang, consumed with curiosity, pointed a finger at the packages.

"Ah, not yet," said Shardun genially, shaking his head and reaching into his trouser-pocket for a bunch of keys. "Everything's nicely locked so none of my own birds can lift a single screw. Patent locks, too. You can't open them with a hair-pin or a nail. There's number one open, number two, and number three. Now, Kettling, do you know the right military term for a mortar, a Stokes mortar?"

"A Stokes mortar!" echoed Kettling nervously. "Dear me, no; what does it do?"

"Do! It blows everything and everybody to pieces at the lowest shell-cost you can possibly find. And they're

handy. Two men can carry them anywhere, and at a pinch one man is all they want. I mean without the base-plate, which you've got to load on a mule. Total weight under seventy-pounds. Simple as fire-crackers if you don't get your fingers caught. The fuse is my own patent. Now, in a preliminary way, ask the general if he wants a line of spit-fires that he can multiply indefinitely? Tell him the shells burst with great lateral effect, sweep the ground well, and have an effective range of from one thousand to two thousand yards. I'm talking of the three-inch. With a six-inch they're good up to three times that distance and they can raise merry hell, believe me. I'll show him the model."

Out of the Gladstone bag he took his little mortar and fitted on the tripod. Then he brought out a shell-case, painted a neat grey, and afterwards the detonators, and fuses.

"Simple as a Waterbury watch," he explained. "The only trouble about the things is getting the T. N. T. But I've got the right people on the string, and they will ship straight to me *via* the Cape as soon as they get the cash. I can turn these things out like hot cakes. If the general wants a demonstration I'll arrange one at the rifle-range. They'll be a hades of a row about it, but it can be wangled. We'll erect a matshed and I'll fill it with dummies, and he'll soon see what happens to them. Is he interested?"

General Wang was diabolically interested. He lifted up the light mortar and carried it round the room. He stripped it of its tripod; put the tripod back; examined the shell-cases and detonators; and even got down on one knee to see how high angle-fire could be controlled.

Now he stood up.

"How much?" he said laconically.

Shardun burst into homeric laughter.

"How much! I've not got any. I'll have to make 'em. I've got my dies, and everything complete, but no factory. Give me a factory and I'll tell him how much fast enough. This is something new. There's nothing in this class out here. I need a factory, with lathes and a hundred and one things. And that costs money."

He stood rubbing his chin, a veritable picture of a maimed giant in a quandary. He listened to the flood of words flowing from his interpreter for some time.

"I can see the general's interested," he declared. "Kettling, explain to him that this is the chance of a lifetime. I'm in the market to find someone to build me a factory, any kind of a factory, so long as we get lathes and turning-machines to start with. I'll run up a shell factory alongside. We can start in a small way, put in junk machinery until he's blown his rivals into submission, and then buy better ones with the loot. Start, say, with an output of five mortars a week. When he gets a reserve of a couple of hundred we can speed up on shells. That will make a brighter China."

He reached into his bag and produced drawings. He pushed General Wang from one side of the table to the other as he explained each point—he treated him like a rubber ball. "You see, to make the lay-out clear, I've coloured the machines differently. It will work like a clock once we've got her going."

He talked incessantly, even bringing his stump of an arm into play to hold papers and push the little general about. "Talk to him, Kettling, show him the advantage of being the first in the field with a new gadget. It will be like the tanks on the Somme in 1916—a regular surprise packet when he starts loosing off from scores of

mortars. They always dig in at once here; a stream of shells from these little ducks is just what's required to loosen them up. It will be a walk-over every time for him. I'll demonstrate this one tomorrow or next day. Don't let up. Pour it into him in bucket-loads."

The room resounded with talk. It was incessant, a medley of arguments, explanations, objections, interjections. General Wang, completely captivated by this new idea, realizing in a flash that this was precisely the weapon which would be most serviceable to him, stood with a hungry, intense look on his face.

"It may take too long to erect," he muttered. "Factories are different from guns. I must protect them, or they may be taken from me. How can I do that?"

Shardun lighted a fresh cheroot, and brushed the objection aside with a laugh.

"Leave it to me," he exclaimed. "We'll call it a bicycle plant, and invoke extraterritoriality. Ever heard of extraterritoriality? It's harder to say three times fast than any other word; and once upon a time I thought it was a joke. That's true. You can get away with anything you please with it, so long as you keep a front as bold as brass and say 'extraterritoriality.' I wish you could hear what I did single-fisted on the Yangtsze—ran a whole arsenal for one general and was paid every day at six o'clock. How did I do it? Extraterritoriality. Bluffed everybody and delivered the goods. They chased me out of it finally. But I got away with my dies after wrecking the blooming arsenal."

He talked incessantly with an amount of energy that seemed inexhaustible. They watched him, amazed, fascinated by the battle that was going on between the imperturbability of the East and the energy of the West, as

interested as if the solution of the problem would affect their daily bread.

At last General Wang spoke.

"I am prepared to support the scheme if it is within my means, which are limited."

At that Shardun smiled; his boyish face lighted up and his blue eyes twinkled.

"Very good, very excellent. I propose a recess while we get something to eat. Trent, didn't you say you were going to feed us? It's two o'clock already."

They moved to another room where a table had been prepared. The conversation remained centred round the same subject—was the scheme feasible, would it be a paying one in a military sense; how long would it take to develop? The little interpreter, less terrified than at the commencement, was still on pins and needles; every time General Wang barked a question at him he jumped.

"These military men are terrible—terrible indeed," he explained in a stage whisper. "This one has his revolvers on under his long coat—I have seen the butts project. He may shoot me if I displease him. He is above the law, quite above it. We are powerless."

"Nonsense," objected Kettling. "He would no more fire a revolver in a foreigner's house than commit suicide."

"Revolver—who said revolver?" interjected Shardun. "I always carry one—Browning .32. Want to see it? They're as common as mud in this country, now. Every mail steamer brings in forty or fifty in the coal-bunkers to beat the embargo."

He reached into his pocket and handed it round the table. General Wang said nothing but looked on with an indifferent smile, as if this was a bit of childishness which

neither surprised nor interested him. His mind was concentrated on the issue which had been so unexpectedly raised; he was debating what lump sum he could afford to offer to close this deal.

When they pulled back their chairs he had not yet decided. But he had made progress; he was determined to remain true to his own method of bargaining.

He approached the Stokes mortar and picked it up again.

"He's in love with that toy; I've got him hooked," said Shardun, in a whisper to Trent. "I think I shall begin to pack up like the itinerant curio-dealers when they have exhausted their arguments and try the supreme bit of bluff."

"One hundred thousand dollars down in cash against a contract and ownership of all materials, machines and buildings," said General Wang unexpectedly, in the vernacular. "Translate," he added imperiously to the interpreter, watching him closely.

Deep silence fell. Shardun stood like a carved statue. His quick blue eyes were no longer smiling; he was calculating rapidly in his head.

"It takes three lakhs really to do anything worth while," he began. "A hundred thousand is on the short side. Three lakhs is what I want—absolutely. I tell you what I'll do, I'll split and make it two hundred thousand, the second hundred thousand within a month."

There was a medley of words in two languages—expostulations, replies. Before Kettling knew where he was, Shardun had seized General Wang by the hand and was shaking it vigorously.

"You cut things pretty fine and it's like drawing eye-teeth to get the cash out of you, but this time it's a deal,"

he said. "Now I've got a lot of hustling to do in two languages. First payment tomorrow morning, does that suit you? The first thing is to get this stuff packed and out of sight." He went to the door and blew his whistle. "Now we'll get the main points down on paper. Some of you fellows lend a hand. Not so dusty for a day's work—I thought he was good for about five lakhs—that's about their limit."

He set to work using his one hand with marvellous dexterity, talking incessantly, his energy as inexhaustible at the end as it had been at the beginning, his confidence in himself as sublime as that of the fabled thin red line.

III

General Wang came out of the close atmosphere with a little sigh of relief and satisfaction. He had pledged everything he had in the world without so much as blinking an eyelid. He was convinced that he had made an excellent bargain. While the one-armed man was difficult to drive into a corner, once he had him there he talked sense. He was filled with exultation by the thought that given a few months' breathing-space he would be armed as no divisional commander in the country. He would make short work of any opponents. He gave a grim smile as he thought of that. Instinctively he felt his girdle under his long gown to see if the mass of papers which he had taken away was sitting snug.

Then, characteristically, he dismissed the matter from his mind, and looked around the vast garden where he had once roamed as a stripling.

Everything was different—these foreigners had converted it to suit their tastes. Even the deep well, which tradition said was haunted, had been closed. He remembered the fantastic stories about it. He would pay a visit to the lumber-merchant's daughter, who was now a widow. Yes—he would do that; it would be amusing to see if she would recall the youth she had once known.

Now he smiled to himself, much amused, as he passed out of the gateway. This would be a true part of himself

and his achievement; not like the other, a dissipation, a self-indulgence obtaining a spurious value from his dupes.

He refused the gatekeeper's offer to call a conveyance, but he dropped a bright silver dollar into his obsequious hand, knowing that it would return to him after many days. It was but a step down the street to where the forest of timber used to mark the lumber-merchant's house. The timber was gone, but he remembered the door without any difficulty. Raising the tiny native knocker, he rapped insistently as a man of action raps and then prepared to wait, gazing on the silent lane which was without animation although it was not yet dusk, and thinking about all the things which once had happened here. When, finally, he heard slow steps approach on the inside and a cautious old voice ask him who he was, he answered cheerfully enough:

"I am General Wang, in command of the Thirty-ninth mixed brigade. I wish to see the lady. I have a message."

"We receive no callers," said the cautious old voice. "The daughter of the house is in mourning since two years. No caller is received."

The soldier in him bristled indignantly behind the door.

"I am not asking your customs," he rejoined imperiously. "I have a mesage for the lady. Open for me and receive my card."

He rattled the door in an irritable way, and the door yielded to his insistence. An old woman stood before him. He speeded her with the comment: "The hour is not early. I have other business. I beg you be quick. Here you are treating a respectable man like a robber. Fortunately no one has overheard, or else there would be laughter in the street."

With bravado in his manner, he sauntered after her down the narrow passage-way between the pavilions; overhearing scraps of the conversation which followed although he had not yet been invited in. . . . "I do not know him. . . . Oh, you have done wrong to admit him. What shall I say to him now?"

He remembered the soft voice which uttered these objurgations perfectly; it enchanted him; it made him smile and nod his head in rhythm with it as if it were a dance—something with which he must keep step.

"But he is a general," the old servant was objecting. "No good ever comes from refusing a soldier these days. He would force the door—there is no limit to what soldiers do. It may be that there is a message."

"What message can there be for me?" said the soft voice. "With father and mother and husband dead, who is there that can wish to converse with me?"

"There is no danger in speech," said the old woman. "I will stand near, and from shame he will treat you kindly."

"Take him to the guest-room: I will come." This with a little sigh.

Now the old woman hobbled out and said:

"This way, please. The lady will attend soon. We are unaccustomed to guests and can hardly receive you with due respect."

In the guest-room the light was so poor that the old servant muttered and went out to fetch a lamp. Just then the daughter of the house appeared. She was in the half-mourning of a widow, a delicate grey which fitted her gentleness exquisitely.

He bowed to her while she hesitated, murmuring the customary greetings, not knowing who he was. He was

amazed by her; and spoke hesitatingly, as if confused, as he watched her face.

"For many years we have not met. The years have gone by until everything of my youth has been forgotten. But today, coming unexpectedly to the Capital on important business, I went across the street to where the foreigners live. Then I remembered much. The foreigner told me that your father was dead. I came to pay my respects for your bereavement, and that is why I have come."

He watched her intently as she stood there in the dim light, and he found her gentle fears delicious.

"I do not remember the circumstance of our acquaintance," she faltered. "Perhaps it is that you knew my father——"

"And you, too!" he cried roguishly. "Have you forgotten how you instructed me about the well and the spirits that came from it? When Great House was first occupied by foreigners these many years back you taught me much! Have you forgotten everything?"

His speech was stopped by her little cries, her excited exclamations.

She came nearer, talking, dropping words all around him:

"You are the one. . . . It is unthinkable. . . . Yes, but it is true." Her eyes became bright. "It was said that you had been killed in battle. That my father said. And you have come back!"

"I'm the one," he said, enjoying it as he would have a most exquisite story. "I'm the one. My memory comes back. Every detail is remembered. I remember how first we met. Your father was in anger—you were greatly afraid. So long ago though it may be, each

thing is remembered by me." He smiled at her as she still exclaimed, his palate tickled as it was seldom tickled by her gentle ways. "Up and down the country I have fought these many years. Never a quiet moment, always moving—always fighting or preparing to fight. Friends are few and far between, and watchful we must be—and vengeful, too, for that is the true protection against treachery. A dozen times I might have died had I not escaped by quickness. I understand why they said I had been killed."

He talked on, finding her a willing listener. She sat in the lamp-light, so delicately on a chair that watching her was enough to please him. He was amazed that he could have forgotten her so long; he was glad that he had come. Here she was waiting—waiting in her widowhood.

"No time have I had for family affairs," he remarked, after many other words. "Here I am nearly gone forty and no sons to my name and the prospect of being killed. You see how gloomy it is for me?"

She dropped her eyes and spoke not a word.

"Yet I would like it different," he resumed, very seriously. "I am such a man as would like sons. A number for my old age, if I am not killed in battle. Sons are good. I command ten thousand men, but what good is that if after me there is no one to succeed? Yes, certainly that is true." He smiled at her in an ingratiating way.

"I have been married," she murmured, "and am now a widow with no children. It is sad to be without children."

"Why did you return to your father's house?" he said.

"They were poor, the other family," she replied, "and

there was jealousy, and I was the last of my father's family. The house is mine by his desire, even though the relatives claim it."

Thus they talked and all the time he watched her, finding satisfaction in this meeting and turning a thought over in his mind.

"The meal is cooked," said the old woman, coming in and speaking in a stage whisper. "Perhaps the gentleman would eat."

"Gladly, gladly," he cried in acceptance. "I have only eaten foreign food today; I am hungry for our own." He rubbed his hands. "You see I am untroubled by all circumstances. Today, I have attended to important business with the foreigners. For many hours we were hotly discussing. And I settled everything very well. I have invited them to a feast."

He rubbed his hands as the old woman came in with the steaming dishes; and as he ate and talked he made up his mind. He would deal with this thing now—when the old woman had gone out of the room. This was the time to act, before he became doubtful of his own wisdom. A widow who had borne her husband no children—well, what matter? He thought of the many virgins in the land who had been pressed on him—he thought of his vigorous camp-life; and when the old woman had left the room he cleared his throat.

"Surely you have treated me too kindly," he remarked. "It is with difficulty that I go. Yet the hour has come when I must leave. Tomorrow, or in day or two, I shall have to return to my camp." He stared at her. She was healthy, well developed; a ripe woman. It would be a pity to miss the opportunity. He moved nearer to her.

"Would you deign to leave with me? To unite our families would be good, most fortunate——"

She looked at him, frightened, as if not understanding, as if doubting that she had heard right.

"Leave with you? What shame for a widow in her second year of mourning to speak so?"

He gave a rough laugh.

"Today all men do as they please. I offer you a home. I have much to offer. I am the one who succeeds. You will come?"

She shook her head.

"What shame you put on a widow!" she whispered, as if fascinated. "What shame! The neighbours would tell the story far and wide, how a military man came to my father's house and took me away."

"The neighbours?" he said hotly. "Of what account are neighbours these days? They neither protect nor help even if they talk much. Neighbours will never deter me."

Yet he was secretly delighted by her reply; it gave him a sense of victory. For if she had no argument but the neighbours and he had thrust that aside, what resistance could she make?

He seized her impetuously by both hands, in a strange, almost womanish way, so that they swayed to and fro as if a certain rhythm possessed them—the rhythm of life.

She looked at him, no longer frightened; no longer did she resist. He had thrown off his long coat to eat; now the pistols in his belt flashed in the light of the lamp as though he were a god of war.

He resumed in a thick voice, almost like a whisper:

"There will be nothing formal about our marriage. It will be quickly done. Why should it not be quickly done? You see, it is speedily arranged nowadays; even girls leave their homes alone. Now is the time, when the relatives are away."

He had gone to the door and called to the old woman, as if he were in full command of the situation.

"Go down the street—go to the carriage-keeper's," he cried. "Get a carriage at once. We have decided on a change for your mistress. She comes with me and you shall come, too. Quickly to the carriage-keeper's. See, I give you a wedding-gift."

She came towards him, babbling strangely as he pushed money into her astonished, trembling old hands; he pushed her towards the door; he commanded her, chided, exhorted her, highly anxious to have that which he had set his heart upon completed and made irrevocable, as with all things, by the force of his will.

IV

Kettling had remained behind for a minute or two, after Shardun and Trent had left, in order to help the nervous little interpreter to get his work finished. When that was over he paused undecided in the garden.

This long discussion had been so distasteful to him that he felt unhappy. It was horrible to think of these elaborate preparations to manufacture explosives to blow up the unfortunate peasantry who masqueraded as soldiers. Was this all Western civilization had to offer, was this the infallible end? He though of Shardun's cheerfulness with amazement; did he ever reflect on the consequences of his acts? He must take him aside some day; it would be interesting to hear exactly what he had to say.

Then he thought of himself.

For nearly a month now his life had been disrupted, and he had been unable to devote himself to his habitual work. Trent had dragged him off on a voyage of exploration to some ruins, and that was why he had been on the train. Then had come all the hardships of their bandit experiences; and now, before he was even properly rested, he was dragged into this long and tedious piece of business. How could he refuse when he was under such great obligations to his friend? He wanted to go home and begin his work, but he was not in the proper spirit for it. He was engaged on the history of early Arab navigation in the East, a subject about which he knew more than anyone else. The charming and romantic

world of those dim and distant days did not mix with the hard reality he had just faced; to be properly tasted it had to be preceded by peacefulness and isolation. It was impossible to reconstitute the past if the shadow of the present fell across his page; the turbaned master mariners, who had so long been dust, would not become real to him and spin their marvellous tales of the Seven Seas in a credible way. Quiet was what he required—peace of mind—with the living world buried and forgotten. Then the figures arose from the pages of Arabic and stalked before him. The sails bellied out as they caught the monsoons; and the glamour of the Spice Islands and to the vast swamps of the Mekong estuary affected him just as it had these men who had traversed barren oceans in their quest of trade. He saw them land in old Canton, when there were Brahmin temples there; he saw them come to the mouths of unidentified rivers and offer their wares in exchange for silks and potteries, which even now were being re-discovered after a lapse of ten centuries at the ends of the earth. Who had ever written down such enchanting stories as that one of the Island of Women, whereon no man might set foot and where the women became pregnant from the wind; or that other one of the shallow magnetic sea which drew the iron nails from the ships and caused them to founder? The hours he spent over such tales were golden hours; and time passed away from them was wasted time.

Guns, explosives, shells—what a hideous contrast!

This man wished to blow up, destroy, and erase so thoroughly that the very memory of the past would be lost.

Nothing in the world could be morally so reprehensible.

He must decline to be present again.

Yes——

He stopped as he heard a piano sound from the main living pavilions. He listened for a bit to a lilting melody which carried his thoughts far away and was as balm to his spirit. He hesitated, wondering how he would be received. Then he decided to go in, as he remembered that Enid had asked him to attend to some little commission. Very quietly he hung up his hat and walked through the house until he came to the music-room.

"May I come in?" he said, peering round the corner in his short-sighted way. "What, it is you! This is the first pleasant thing that has happened to me today. Please keep on playing. I will sit as quiet as a mouse."

"Oh, what a start you gave me," cried Gladys. "You must have tiptoed in! I imagined I had the house all to myself. Mrs. Trent telephoned me to come and try her piano. I have been sight-seeing for nearly a week and I felt I had had enough. Do sit down and talk. What have you been doing to look so tired?"

At that he seemed concerned.

"Nobody ever says anything like that to me," he remarked. "I *am* tired. We have had a dreadful day—six hours of it. I thought it would never end. Just over there—" He pointed out of the windows to Trent's library pavilion at the bottom of the garden in a way which suggested oppressive things.

Gladys opened wide her eyes—her frank blue eyes.

"What can it have been? It sounds like something thrilling. Was it anything mysterious?"

Kettling made a wry face.

"I suppose there's no harm in telling you that that little vagabond who has now become a general, and who was once a groom in this house, our own particular

General Wang, the hero of yesterday and today, has been contracting for a huge amount of munitions and a factory as well."

She gave an exclamation.

"Does Mr. Trent deal in arms?"

Kettling held up his hands.

"Trent! Heavens preserve us, no. It's Shardun—have you met him? An extraordinary man, a human volcano. He's got one arm and seems seven feet tall. How a man can do what he does I cannot conceive. One reads about these things in books, but to meet them in real life is much more curious. What he has not done since he has come to this country!"

She sat forward on the piano-stool, watching him with a smile.

"Tell me more about it; it sounds interesting, and not at all depressing."

"That's because you're young. . . . It was just arms and the man, in all possible variations. It was infinitely tedious to me at least. You see, I have a lot of imagination—perhaps too much. I am always visualizing the consequences of whatever I see done. And what weapons do is always depressing to me. They shatter all that is pleasant in this country; they deepen the chaos. Oh, if you had seen all the changes I have in a few short years you would feel as I do. However, it is now all arranged. Shardun will soon be turning out trench-mortars like hot cakes. I confess I didn't know what a trench-mortar was, but Shardun soon instructed me. He carries one round in an enormous Gladstone bag on the off chance of meeting a buyer."

Gladys began laughing.

"That's funny. That doesn't depress me at all."

"Pandora's box," said Kettling lugubriously. "It's wasted my day and made me gloomy."

"You're too impressionable. Why don't you just forget it?"

"I can't—it links up with too many other things already in my mind. I hate firearms. I wish Trent hadn't asked me to be present. You remember that story I told you in the train? Well, this day's work has brought it back to me with a vengeance. We're siting in the exact spot where Scott committed suicide."

"Oh, Dr. Kettling, how can you? You're gruesome," she cried, looking round instinctively.

"I'm sorry, very sorry," he rejoined. "But it relieves me to talk about it. The arrangement of the rooms was different in those days—this was the main living-room. Scott dragged himself in here from the next room and was lying across there on the ground when I came in. You know, I was very afraid at first. I ran for the others, it was terribly tragic. I had never seen a man kill himself before, and the whole thing made me physically ill. I shall never forget. For months afterwards I refused to come into this house. How funny that I should talk to you like this! Really, you will have a poor opinion of me, but it's hard to shut some things up inside one all one's life."

Gladys had become serious; she turned back to the piano and played a chord or two. Then she said resolutely: "This is where I will always disagree with you. You've got a morbid streak, Dr. Kettling. There's no earthly reason why you should talk about such things."

"Does it sound as bad as that? I apologize. I will speak of something else. Tell me what you were playing?"

"No," she said, getting up and closing the piano. "I'm

out of the mood. Besides I hate this room since you told me that."

He looked at her, astonished, as if unable to account for this sudden outburst.

"But what has come over you?" he stammered. "This is truly one of my bad days. Every one I come in contact with I rub the wrong way. I looked forward to such a pleasant talk. You were always such a ray of sunshine. I could hardly believe my eyes when I found it was you sitting at the piano. There were twenty things I wanted to say."

He looked at her reproachfully.

"I'm listening," she said.

"But you're standing up as if you were ready to go. Won't you sit down again?"

"I don't think I will."

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his forehead, as if his anxiety had created overmuch heat in him.

"Well, this is dreadful. I used to pride myself on my talking and now I can only irritate."

At that she laughed, in spite of herself.

"Don't be absurd. I was just going when you came in. I've been here over an hour. Come and see me when you've got over your dumps."

He looked through the door; for his ears were sharp even if his eyesight was so poor.

"You can't go now. Here's your hostess and Trent."

For a moment they stood still, as if they had been surprised in something suspicious.

"Hullo," exclaimed Enid, coming in rapidly. "What's the matter with you two? You both look funny. What have you been doing?"

"Quarrelling," said Gladys, without a smile.

"Quarrelling—how interesting! What about?"

She looked from one to the other.

"I was upbraiding Dr. Kettling about nothing in particular. Matters were just getting a little more peaceful when you came in," said Gladys as lightly as she could.

"I told my husband to come along specially to hear you play," said Enid. "Aren't you going to?"

"Do you mind if I don't? We've talked such a lot that I couldn't get back the spirit."

Enid had seated herself on the arm of a chair.

"What nice music, but horribly difficult," she said, looking at her book. "How did you find the piano? This is a terrible place to keep it in tune. Ah, here's something I know. Do talk as if you didn't care what I was doing."

She had taken off her hat and commenced playing. Kettling, with a dreamy expression on his face, went and stood looking out of the window, his hands tightly clasped.

Gladys turned to Trent who had sat down near her.

"Who's this mysterious one-armed man Dr. Kettling has been telling me about, making contracts all day in your office to blow up all China?"

He smiled.

"That sounds a large order. It was just a small deal compared to some of the things done nowadays. I wish you'd been there and seen my General Wang matching his wits against Shardun. It was great."

"You promised me I was going to see your General Wang, as you call him."

"You shall. He's going to give a feast or something in our honour and I'll see you get there. I think it's for

the day after tomorrow. Shardun will be back here in a few minutes, if you would like to wait. You can hear what he has to say about it all. He thinks their battles are mainly noise, and that as some one is going to help them to fight he might as well be the man and pocket the profit."

"That's a simple philosophy," she said smilingly, because she always enjoyed discussing with him.

"Not as simple as it looks. Shardun wants results; anything that gives results is interesting to him. He's got too much energy. He's quite the strongest man I've seen for years. A sort of Berserker, only he's short of one arm. I've never seen such a talker."

"Things affect people differently. Dr. Kettling is infinitely depressed with it all. He only wants to talk of the past."

A shadow passed over Trent's face.

"I know," he said. "I've been trying to correct that in him for years and years, but he won't change."

"The changeless East working its spell?" she said interrogatively.

"That is an old delusion," he objected.

She thought a minute.

"I don't know; I'm not sure in my mind. It's too strange to me yet. But one day I'll know."

The piano stopped.

"Ring a bell and get those lazy servants to bring in something to drink," said Enid over her shoulder, as she closed the piano.

Now she came up with the book of music in her hand as if she wished to hand it to Gladys personally. Once again the two women looked at one another almost as if they had never really perceived each other until then, a

long, searching look from two pairs of eyes with a touch of apprehension and surprise and rivalry in it.

"There are some intriguing things in here," said Enid, giving her the book and walking away; Gladys was certain from the way she said it that she was referring to the conversation which had taken place before she arrived.

"I think I'll slip away," remarked Kettling, during the moment she was alone. "Please forget anything I said—please do not imagine that I am habitually like that. In spite of everything I enjoyed our talk so much."

When Gladys got home she remembered precisely the point she had reached both with Kettling and Trent.

And she was destined to return to the point. The very next morning, on the streets, she happened to be met by a messenger carrying a note which was plainly not for her at all, but which by some queer process of reasoning the man thought he could get her to accept. Whilst she was trying to shake him off, handicapped by her ignorance of the language, down the other side of the street came Trent.

"Oh, Mr. Trent," she called frantically. "Do come and rescue me. I haven't an idea what this man is saying or why he wants me to take this letter. I've been trying to explain by signs that it isn't mine, but he seems so stubborn."

Trent settled the matter for her speedily enough.

"What are you doing out so early?" he inquired.

"I've been poking about in the curio-shops," she rejoined. "My aunt says I'm most unsympathetic not to help her to find the things she wants—medallion bowls. So I started out at eight o'clock sharp. Do come in here

and tell me if these things are genuine. I promised to go back to decide."

She led the way back to one of the innumerable little shops where dealers blandly sit idle for twenty-eight days of the month, knowing well that on the remaining two or three those who stumble in will amply repay them for their vigil.

"Here are the things—this set of eight bowls," she said, taking one out of a case. "The man swears they are genuine, and from his broken English I think he means they're loot from the time of the Manchus."

Trent examined them.

"They're all right," he remarked. "The dealer says he got them from a foreigner. He has the original receipt for the money he paid for them, and he says he's asking you exactly three times the price after having kept them for ten years."

The shopkeeper, a heavy, swarthy man, nodded ingratiatingly and chattered his gutturals. Out of a drawer he now took a box, and out of the box he produced a sheet of soiled paper with faded writing on it.

He handed it to Gladys.

"I wonder if this testimonial has done duty many times before. Isn't that what they do?" she remarked. Then she walked to the light and held up the paper, reading out aloud:

Received from the Pao-ching Curio Store the sum of three hundred dollars in full payment for a set of eight medallion bowls of the Kang Hsi period with Imperial pottery marks.

Tom Scott,
26 February, 1912.

She had read without paying much attention, amused by the dealer's method of securing a customer. But at the last words she gave an exclamation. Now she coloured and mechanically handed the paper over to Trent.

He took it and studied it for a second or two. Then he laid it on the table.

"It's genuine," he said in his deep voice. "I can testify that that is Tom Scott's writing. I had no idea he'd begun selling off just before he died. Of course, you know the whole story. There's no use pretending you don't."

"I'm so sorry," said Gladys impulsively, her face full of concern. "Just fancy such a horrid thing happening."

She bit her lip in annoyance. Vaguely she could see the dealer behind them, his eyes and mouth wide open as if sensing that what he had done was in some mysterious way bad for business—trying to extract the explanation from the air.

Trent looked at the bowls again, and then looked at the receipt.

"I don't remember them at all—I certainly have never seen them before. That was three days before he shot himself, which was on the 29th."

"I couldn't possibly buy them now," exclaimed Gladys, now thoroughly upset. "The more I think of it the more dreadful it seems."

"I'll take them," said Trent. "I'll take the letter as well."

He began talking to the man in the vernacular.

Gladys stood, not knowing what to do.

"I'm awfully sorry about this," she said at last. "I think it's a shame that I should make you buy something

you don't want. I wish I hadn't stopped you on the street. Won't you leave the matter open?"

He shook his head, refusing to see her concern.

"They're mine. The bowls are certainly worth the price. Please don't think about it any more."

He put the tell-tale receipt into his pocket-book. Now he walked out of the shop talking as if nothing at all had happened, although somehow for her those few brief minutes had given a sharper emotion that she could recollect in the whole of her life.

V

The next day they were bidden to the duck banquet which General Wang was offering. Mrs. Briller was very much interested in it, particularly after Gladys had told her something of the reasons which had brought him to the Capital.

"It is an astounding thing to happen—I mean that this should be the very person in Kettling's tale," she said. "Will he be there in full uniform, and can I ask him any questions I like without being rude?"

Trent came to fetch them. It was only a short distance to the inn, and soon they had passed through the entrance, with its great tubs of fish and its stacks of edibles, placed so that every guest might make his own choice on the very threshold. The drawers in a chorus announced them in the customary way; and these cries repeated from courtyard to courtyard lent romance to the scene.

"How enchanting and medieval!" said Gladys. "Arabian Nights again!"

"How appetizing!" added Mrs. Briller. "The odour of roast duck is everywhere."

"We've got a mob of people here tonight," said Trent, leading them up a flight of rickety stairs. "Our little general told Enid to bring as many as she liked."

Gladys had a vision of a long room with a low ceiling and several round tables furnished with stools. The room was already full of smoke, for everybody was smoking cigarettes, and acting very informally.

Trent brought forward a small, stocky man in ordinary civilian dress.

"This is General Wang. He asks me to say that he is much honoured by your coming to his very poor entertainment."

The ladies shook hands, and the small, stocky man drew off for a moment.

"I'm disappointed," said Gladys to Trent. "I expected him to be in his uniform and very imposing. Instead of that he seems quiet and retiring."

"He's embarrassed. Besides, it isn't their custom to wear uniforms at private entertainments. Hullo, he wants to say something."

General Wang had come forward.

"I have just heard," he said, "that you two ladies were also amongst those who suffered misfortune in the train robbery. I hope you will try and forget a vile act."

He bowed ceremonially, and then stood stiffly.

"Very nicely put," said Mrs. Briller approvingly. "We have already forgotten. Thank him for us, Mr. Trent."

But he was not yet at the end.

"Will you stay long?" he inquired of Gladys, looking on her approvingly.

"So it would seem," she replied.

"And do you live in the tall hotel overlooking the palaces? I have been there. I have been to the very top and looked down. You can see much of what we once were from up there." He made an expansive gesture as if to indicate the vastness of the prospect.

"I would like to go inside," said Gladys. "Tell him I would like to explore all the mystery I look down on."

General Wang nodded intelligently.

"Presently you can go—if you stay long enough. It

will be opened to everyone some day, but then a day will come when it will be closed again, for we shall have great men to rule again." Whereupon he withdrew.

"Isn't it curious how they all talk as if they had second-sight," murmured Gladys. "Great men to rule again; what a strange remark!"

"Now you're to take your seats," said Trent to her. "I've put you alongside Shardun so that you can hear all about it. Here he comes. I'll introduce him and leave you."

Shardun, not so imposing now that he was not wearing his beloved shorts, was just as unconventional, and talked as rapidly as ever to Gladys when they were seated.

"Rummy place this. Ever been to one of these entertainments before? I always have a good, solid meal before I turn up; it saves a lot of bother. Trying to pick up microscopic bits of meat with chop-sticks doesn't suit me. Do you see that bird over there? He says he's the greatest lady-killer in the East. When I bore you let me know and I'll change place with him."

Gladys found him entertaining.

"They tell me you're the bad man of the party," she replied, "selling arms to the poor Chinese to kill one another and doing all sorts of wicked things."

He laughed heartily.

"Don't you believe a word they tell you—we're putting up a bicycle factory. Besides this party is due to my energy as a salesman. If I hadn't worked like a galley-slave you wouldn't be going to eat roast duck."—He made a wry face as he tasted some native wine.—"Fearful hog-wash—keep off it," he advised. "Enid's sent a couple of bottles of cocktails. I wish she'd start opening them. She

looks well tonight. Blue always suits her. You've heard that yarn, of course. But she does well by Trent with the social end. She's like me; this is the great adventure. She has landed on her feet, and that's where I'm going to land. That is, if the little general lasts. Just take a look at him. Is he honest or not?"

General Wang at the central table was standing up and pouring wine into his guests' cups from a wine-pot. He was pressing the ladies not to be afraid. His hospitality, he declared, was very poor, but the wine was excellent.

"I don't know," said Gladys doubtfully. "I can't judge him. He made quite a soothsayer's speech just now. I imagine he'll keep his part of the bargain if it pays him to."

"You've got it," agreed Shardun. "You've sized it up. You've got to make it worth while for them to be honest. You see, it's rather important to me. I've signed a contract with him. I look to him to pull me through. You've heard all that stuff about a word being as good as a bond in this country. Don't you believe it. The only thing that keeps men to their contracts is the law, and there isn't any here. Still, I'm willing to gamble on him because he looks as if he would survive. If anybody blows him into the next world before my factory is ready I'll be a bankrupt. Isn't that so, General?"

General Wang, who was now walking from table to table, serving his guests personally with wine, did not understand a word. Nevertheless he smiled and nodded vigorously. All his ugliness passed out of his face, which became boyish and cheerful.

"Aren't they chameleons?" remarked Gladys. "Did you see how his smile changed him?"

"Good fellows, some of them," said Shardun. "But

stick 'em in a tight place and they wilt. I must say, however, that it isn't only here where that happens. I could tell you some stories that would astonish you. Here's the blessed duck at last. Now I'm going to commence to eat. Let me help you."

They laughed together as they struggled with the little, succulent pieces of brown meat; they laughed still more when Shardun performed a marvellous acrobatic feat with his chop-sticks and a dish of condiment.

A little later he said suddenly:

"Look here, when you're sick of me tell me and I'll change places with one of the others—there's a pale lemon man over there with no chin at all who might suit. Do you see that woman with the mass of golden hair? They called her the *Wunderschöne Sultanstochter,* and the little fellow next to her is 'Asra'—it's a song, isn't it. And the thin French girl's name is *la fille du régiment.* That's also supposed to be funny. Enid's great at picking them all up to make things go—for Heaven's sake, don't tell her I said that. Now watch me startle her." He took an orange from the stack of fruit in the centre of the table. "Catch, Enid, catch!"

He tossed the orange high in the air over to her table. She gave a cry, but she caught it neatly enough and threw it laughingly back to him. "Good for you; well done," he said commendingly. "I thought you would muff it." He turned to Gladys. "She's got a good eye and good nerves and can catch as well as a boy. She won't drop her bundle."

Everybody had eaten so much duck that they declared that it was impossible to remain seated any longer; and now, talking gaily to one another, they formed new groups.

Monsieur Damian approached Gladys.

"I have not been able to get near you the whole evening," he murmured regretfully. "You have been so engaged that there was no means of attracting your attention—unless by throwing an orange at you!"

"Why didn't you?" replied Gladys gaily. "Perhaps I shouldn't have been as clever as Mrs. Trent at catching it."

"You think her clever? What was that one-armed man talking to you about all the time? He seemed to hold your attention."

"He's been telling me all his hopes and fears. His point of view is certainly novel. His opinion of diplomacy isn't very high."

"Nobody's is," returned Monsieur Damian, with engaging frankness. "Why should it be? We do nothing. We cannot agree. We are restricted to certain forms. General Wang was questioning me all through dinner about foreign governments. The subject seemed to fascinate him. He seemed amazed that we should hover between tremendous potency and absolute impotence. I tried to explain to him the intricacies of diplomatic procedure, and it was quite remarkable the way he put his finger on the weak point—that once you open the door to discussion you have opened the door to inaction. Only an Asiatic would have thought of that. He told me that he believed solely in armed force, and when I said that those days were over for us he was frankly sceptical. What's happening over there? Let's go and see."

"Tell him he must, I absolutely insist," Enid was crying. "Monsieur Damian, come here and lend your support. Do you know what we've discovered? Our host got married last night, or the night before, for the first

time in his life, he declares, although he's forty. His bride is somewhere on the premises, but too shy to come. I insist that he should bring her in."

"Yes, yes," everyone cried vociferously. "We want the bride."

General Wang remained courteous but non-committal. But at last he went up to Trent and said in an undertone in the vernacular:

"Is such a custom usual among foreigners?"

"Certainly—certainly."

"But she is timid, truly timid. She will obey, but she will not speak. Still, if you say that it is customary I will bring her."

He was absent a very long time; but at length the door opened, and preceded by her husband the bride entered.

With her eyes cast down, a delicious modesty showing itself in her every movement, the widow who had been swept so stormily into marriage went round the circle and greeted everyone, as she had been told to, with a bashful hand-shake. The heavy gold bracelets on her wrists clashed as she did so, but she submitted them to inspection with complete detachment. General Wang, attentive and unsmiling, watched her with an impersonal air as if she were a piece of mechanism unrelated to his own life.

"Isn't she delicious?" murmured Gladys to Trent. "Look at the little design on the collar and her embroidered shoes and her dignity. Quite wonderful, I think."

He nodded, as if equally interested.

"It's been most romantic," he explained. "She's the daughter of the lumber-merchant who lived opposite to me. The old man is dead and the daughter herself was a widow. It was all arranged while you were at the piano

that afternoon. He walked across the street, after completing his arms business, and insisted on marrying her. There's no ceremony at all with a widow—she just comes to your house. It's not supposed to be very moral for widows to marry again—almost as bad as bigamy is with us."

Gladys continued to follow the young woman round the room as if fascinated by her.

"Tell the general we want his wife to come and see us," she said impulsively. "Fancy being just whisked away like that, like a piece of baggage, without a moment's notice. Isn't it strange? And what is he going to do with her when he goes back to camp? Put her in a tent?"

General Wang smiled grimly. He was understood to say that women in China did not go to camps; she would remain where she was.

"What simplicity, what lessons for us!" exclaimed Monsieur Damian, in his most didactic manner. "Love, courtship and marriage and then back home—all in the space of forty-eight hours; for the general says he is leaving tomorrow."

"It's a shame," cried Gladys. "I think her sweet and I wish I could tell her so."

General Wang had said a brief word under his breath. His spouse inclined her head, and very gently she left the room by way of a French window leading out to the verandah.

"Don't go, don't go," cried Gladys in English, running after her. "Oh, I wish I could speak to you; I wish I could ask you what you thought of us all."

Impulsively she seized the young woman's hand. It was a delicate hand, strong and firm.

"Where do you live, somewhere up there?"

They were on the verandah now—a narrow native verandah which looked out on a vast courtyard, entirely unlighted except for what light came from the rooms. Sounds of revelry were around them. A guitar was twanging and peals of laughter came from far away.

The young woman pointed. High up on the other side of the courtyard she lived. From her hair she took a jasmine flower and pressed it on Gladys.

"I wish we could have done something tonight to celebrate your marriage," said Gladys.

Then the East gravely smiled at the West, not understanding a word except that here was sympathy.

They stood looking out on the night. The guitar continued to twang and the distant laughter did not cease. Below them, now that their eyes were accustomed to the dark, they could see the figures of people. In a corner of the courtyard, at the extreme end from where they stood, a door was suddenly flung open, and the bronzed figure of a naked man pouring water over himself stood out for a moment in a shaft of light. Then the door slowly swung to, and there was blackness where there had been life.

The young woman murmured words that were incomprehensible. Very delicately, like a shadow, she melted away.

Gladys lifted the jasmine to her nostrils in the dark. It was fragrant, with an odd fragrance; such a furtive little message, she thought.

Back in the dining-room she found that everyone was busy getting their hats and coats.

"Come on, hurry up," cried Enid. "We're moving on. It's the polite thing to do at these dinners, unless you

start gambling. We're going to a wonderful place miles away."

"What's it all about?" said Gladys to Shardun.

"It's the only place in the whole town I want to see," he replied. "I put Enid up to asking that lemon-faced man to take us there. He's just been and telephoned. It's the house of the big noise in arms-dealing, a Greek who gets his supplies from all over Europe and ships from a wharf at Hamburg that's under a special article of the Versailles Peace Treaty. I wormed that out of Damian, who seemed to know something about it. I'm doing this to point a moral and adorn a tale. I want the jolly dips to know that right under their noses the blessed embargo is set aside. That's cover for me. I'll drive you there."

They raced off in the night to another part of the city.

"Some place," Shardun commented, as they waited a minute for the others. "It's extraordinary what you can get away with here if you just do as you please. This place is a regular ammunition-dump. He's got thousands of tons in the cellars. You must think we're all crazy out here. Well, we are; and can you blame us? How long are you staying?"

"How long! You'd better ask my aunt. She's started collecting curios, and she wouldn't hear of going now."

He nodded.

"I've got no time for that sort of thing. I think I've spotted a winner, and I'm putting every bean I've got in the world on it. Here are the rest of them, including Lemon-face."

They filed into a great entrance-hall lighted by a single red light placed behind a gold screen. Then through slid-

ing doors to a pavilion with blue lights, which was furnished exclusively with opium-divans on which were burning opium-lamps.

"This is where the victims do their business," chuckled Shardun to Gladys. "I suppose the master of the house will arrive through a trap-door. No, my God, there he is on the last divan."

A very tall, thin man had risen off some cushions, and everybody was presented to him.

"We've heard so much about your place; it is nice of you to have us and let us look around," said Enid.

"Please go everywhere," he replied. "The yellow room is the next one. My visitors invariably come at night, and it amuses them to walk round before they begin smoking and discussing business. The lighting is in the five primary colours of the national flag."

They wandered through vast, dimly lighted pavilions, talking in subdued voices.

"We're like shades in the infernal world," whispered Kettling, who was thoroughly aroused. "Every crime in the calendar could be committed here. It is the most decadent thing I have ever seen. There should be poisoned daggers and oubliettes."

"He's got some admirable porcelains," said Mrs. Briller. "I must ask him where he buys."

Enid was with Monsieur Damian.

"This is an outlet for the industry of Mittel-Europa, I understand," he said sardonically. "Incidentally he denies that he is Greek. He says he's a Turk."

"He's given me some ideas in lighting," Enid announced, when they had got to the end and come back to the opium-room. "Do you see the weird effects he gets by concealing his lights behind screens?'

"Can you show us what you've got in the way of samples?" said Shardun, pinching Gladys on the arm.

"Certainly," said the master of the house. "What are you interested in—artillery?"

"Very much so."

"Please seat yourselves on the divans. The windows are arranged for a good view. We will demonstrate all makes."

He pressed a number of buttons and the courtyard outside became flooded with dazzling white light. Doors opened, and a team of men clad in black rattled out a field-gun. Stopping in front of the windows, they went through a number of evolutions and then ran the gun up on to the low marble platform which fronted the pavilion. Now they brought a mountain-gun; then a medium howitzer; then a giant that needed eighteen men; then special makes, including every variety of machine-gun, until the marble platform had the appearance of an arsenal.

"Bravo, fine show," said Shardun applaudingly. "You've got the goods all right."

The thin, dark man inclined his head.

"And the customers, too. But it is too early for them. They commence coming after midnight, and very often stay till dawn. The ammunition is now being prepared for inspection in the yellow room. Will you not all come into the dining-room and have a little supper, unless any of you wish to smoke?" He pointed to the opium-divans.

"What an evening," exclaimed Gladys, when they began to prepare to go home.

"Mad, what?" said Shardun again, his eyes twinkling.

Everybody was talking at the top of their voices, but Monsieur Damain was for once a little silent. Outside he said very seriously:

"This is really going a little too far. I shall press for an investigation."

"Do you hear that?" said Gladys to Shardun.

He nodded, undisturbed.

"That is what they always say," he commented.

VI

SHARDUN, in shirt-sleeves and shorts, with an old Terai hat pulled down over his eyes, was standing with his back to the railway; beside him were his interpreter and General Wang. A great red-brick factory with tall smoke-stacks, from which no smoke issued, monopolized the landscape. The three had just finished wandering through it, inspecting the derelict machinery, the broken window glass, the stacks of abandoned materials. The only optimistic sign was Shardun himself, and he was so full of spirits that he talked as incessantly as ever.

"Tell him not to be down-hearted about the amount of time it will take to fix this place up. Get it into his head, Micky, that this is the rarest bit of luck we have had so far. Absolutely dropped from Heaven. Seventy miles from the Capital; property Italian; a Frenchman with an unexpired lease; and a Scandinavian flag floating over it because it's been mortgaged. That involves three Powers. If there's any trouble, we can get them so tied up in diplomatic knots that the shells and mortars will fade into insignificance. I've already bought half the lathes by cable, and I'm picking up fresh stuff every day. The only thing is, I'm a bit on the short side with cash, and he'll have to speed up his payments if he wants the works to blossom overnight. Cash will do it. I will have the whole thing going full blast inside a month. Electric drive, too. Cash is the word."

He puffed at his pipe and scratched his hairy knees, while he waited for the verdict.

General Wang walked round in a circle like a dog that is preparing to lie down. His keen eyes, as he listened to the nervous voice of the interpreter, were here, there and everywhere, extracting every ounce of what the place could yield. He was on the defensive, fighting instinctively to cut down what he had to give to the lowest possible figure, and yet anxious to obtain the largest possible value.

He had evidently made up his mind. For he stopped walking round and put his arms behind his back, as if to hide his hands that must continually give, give.

"How much?" he inquired, in two guttural monosyllables.

"The whole lot—the whole amount the contract calls for," Shardun cheerfully. "If he wants things to happen he's got to put in the wherewithal. I'm not a philanthropist. I supply the energy and the knowledge; he gives the cash. Put it as clearly as that, Micky. He can't hurt you. I could crush him to bits with my one arm."

He laughed uproariously as he showed his immense biceps and made a sweeping movement, which General Wang took to mean confusion to all his enemies. Now Shardun waved in the air the highly technical memorandum which had been translated for the little general's benefit, and of which the only interesting figures were the totals at the end.

"I agree, but there must be the utmost speed," he remarked.

They walked back to the buildings, and from a basket a frugal meal which Shardun had brought was taken out.

"Beer?" he said laconically, pouring out three glasses. "Do you think I can make him tight on this stuff, Micky?"

The interpreter nervously shook his head.

"What did he remark?" inquired General Wang suspiciously in the vernacular.

"He said that beer was good after being in the sun," replied the interpreter blandly.

General Wang gave a grunt, and swallowed a glassful. Then he applied himself ravenously to the bread and sausages, eating as he saw the Englishman eat and ignoring the interpreter just as he ignored the flies.

"My car will be back in a minute," continued Shardun, with his mouth full. "Tell the general I'm going to give him an imitation of a man in a hurry. In a month this will be one of the great hives of industry. I'm going to sleep here tonight. All my kit is coming out, two electricians, and a couple of fellows to bore an artesian-well. The water-supply is important. I'll be in telephonic communication with everywhere by tomorrow. I'm going to borrow the telegraph administration's wires—use 'em without their knowing anything about it. Very simple dodge, but nobody's on to it yet in this country."

General Wang, when he had absorbed this, showed great interest; he wanted to know the principle.

"That's one of my secrets," said Shardun sharply. "We all know how to do it on the other side of the globe. Tell him, Micky, I'm selling him my skill and knowledge, not giving it away. I don't want to show my teeth, but I can bite like a bear."

How much of this filtered through Shardun never knew; but he smiled as he noted that General Wang's manner had become more respectful.

"Another glass of beer, General?" he said. "This is

the last bottle. Then I've got to get on the job. That's my Klaxon sounding on the road. If he wants to see the hustling commence, he had better sit around a bit."

It was, in effect, Shardun's car—a vehicle exactly resembling its master in its prodigious size. It came round the corner at a great rate; and soon men and packages were vomited out of it, while he stood by issuing endless orders.

"Hurry up, Fritz," he said, to a spectacled young German who was one of the handy men he had picked up the day before. "Get all the gear out and see that the Chinks don't snipe anything. Got my typewriter? First thing to do is to get the office fixed up. Start those electricians on the wiring, and see that they don't make a bungle of the insulating. Hullo, Fatty," he continued to his Chinese cook, who was surveying the scene without enthusiasm. "This is all-same camp, what? Fix up something quick in the way of a kitchen. There's a lorry due with blacksmiths some time this afternoon. Start one of the carpenters on what you want. Now then, Fritz, get out the tape. Everything has got to be measured up. I want blue-prints of the floor space and the machinery lay-out at once. Think you can manage it by tomorrow?"

Stimulated by the big man's voice, everyone commenced hustling. The car had given forth an amount of freight which seemed incredible; the packages were being opened where they had been dropped.

"Jump out, Nelson, and lend a hand," cried Shardun to his one-eyed driver. "I'll back her out."

He stepped into the car. With his single hand he manipulated the clutches and the wheel with marvellous skill, running the machine into a shed where there was

not an inch to spare as expertly as a master mariner brings a ship alongside a wharf.

General Wang, visibly impressed, walked up to him, holding up a thumb in sign of supreme approval.

"Hao, hao," he said, putting up one arm to show that he meant it was an exceptional performance for him.

"That's nothing," said Shardun with a grin. "You should see me play golf."

At six o'clock General Wang left, highly pleased. He was not destined to see his factory for many a long day; but he was convinced that he had made a good bargain and that he would get exactly what he had contracted for.

Had he returned a week later he would have been amazed. Shardun had had a siding laid from the main line right into his yard. A host of workmen, to the sound of unending clamour, were doing every imaginable thing; blacksmiths, carpenters, painters, masons and mechanics were at work, hammering, oiling, painting, digging, moving and adjusting.

"Another week and she'll be ship-shape," exclaimed Shardun to his German assistant, who lived with an expression of perpetual surprise on his face. "The Japs or the Chinks couldn't do what we've done in a month. I'll be turning out something as soon as the lathes are in position and those dynamos arrive. I had a marvellous tip given me yesterday by a railway man. I've brought some old trucks and stripped them for the axle steel. We'll bore them out and see how they do for mortars as a start. We'll have pop-guns going as soon as these birds can be taught how to make a fuse. Some country, what? What are you looking so worried about, Fritz?"

"They've commenced talking a good deal, Captain," said the German. "I mean in the town. All sorts of people are making inquiries."

"Let 'em talk. They can't touch me. I'm just manager of an iron foundry—I can't call it a bicycle plant any longer. I've got my alibi prepared."

The young German was not convinced.

"There're people hanging round watching, Captain," he remarked.

"Chinks?"

"No, Japs——"

Shardun gave a laugh.

"I'll fix them. At night or during the day?"

"At night."

Shardun nodded and turned to something else.

"Keep on driving them, Fritz. If you need slave-drivers, turn those Russian time-keepers into foremen and get some more of them. There's half Koltchak's army still hanging around somewhere in the East."

Hour by hour the factory took on a more business-like appearance; Shardun's incredible energy supplied a leadership such as these men had never known before. They were paid well, too—not after a delay, but on the nail, with a gratuity thrown in on the slightest excuse. The factory was pulsating with life, developing something which would take root and never be exterminated. Daily fresh supplies arrived, fresh tools, fresh materials. As soon as one shift of men went off duty another came on—not a minute was lost. A mat village sprang up near by full of hawkers; then tea-shops and money-changers; then the travelling agent of a consolidated tobacco company, whose body was British and whose brains were Yankee, happened along, and the joy of the workers was com-

plete. Shardun drove on inexhaustibly, but the pace was beginning to tell on him.

"Don't feel offended, Fritz," he remarked, "but I'm pushing in another man, a Yank, to manage the gauges. I've been doing eighteen hours a day without any let-up, and if I don't slack a bit it will get me. Seen any more Japs around?"

The German shook his head. But that very evening, Shardun, who was smoking a cigar, noticed a strange little man flitting away. He pretended that he had seen nothing. Leaning up against a wall he watched the night come galloping on.

When it was pitch-dark, he lighted another cigar, puffed at it vigorously until it was glowing, and then stuck it in a crack the height of his head and stole away.

He came out suddenly round a corner and saw the dim shadow of the unbidden guest staring in the direction of the cigar. Without a moment's hesitation he flung himself on the man and crashed him so heavily that he had to pick him up and carry him in.

"Fritz, Fritz," he shouted lustily, "get the whisky or brandy. I've caught your bird. Got him with my cigar. If he'd read Sherlock Holmes he wouldn't have been such an easy mark."

Inside, under the glare of an electric light, they turned their captive inside out—searched his pockets, examined every scrap of paper, and noted the label on his clothing. He lay stirring slightly, still partially stunned by Shardun's rough treatment.

"Perhaps he isn't Japanese, after all," suggested the German.

"He's a Japper all right," said his chief cheerfully. "Want the proof? Pull off his shoes and socks. Now

look at the space between the big toe and the second one, and see how hard the skin is, like a corn. That's the infallible test. Got it from a book on the Russo-Japanese War. The Russians always tested the spies they caught that way; that comes from the strap of the clog they all wear from infancy. No power on earth can make them disguise that. We'll run him ten miles down the road and leave him in a village. I guess he won't trouble to hunt us up again."

Shardun forgot about it speedily enough; for he was turning night into day as far as work was concerned—he was hustling everyone to the limit of their endurance. And all the time the miracle of his energy brought forth results as sensational as those found anywhere.

"She scoons, I tell you, man, she scoons; didn't the fellow who invented schooners say that first?" he said in his peculiar way to the new American machine-room manager. "What we want now are a lot of apprentices, a host of little fellows we can train up quick. They'll be cheap, too, just the price of their feed. Want to see me recruit them?"

He went to one of his trunks and took out a horn, and then walked out towards where the dusty country road led across an unending plain.

"Come on, Micky," he called, as he passed the interpreter's office. "Want to find out how your blooming countrymen react to something that tickles their fancy?"

Out on the road he took his stand between two villages and commenced blowing his horn.

"Used this once in the Manchurian forests with the Wapiti. They come as gentle as birds when they hear it," he gasped, between his blowing. "You'll see the little Chinks commence to line up when they get on to it."

He continued to blow and once more he proved correct. Out of the fields they came, at first haltingly, holding each other by the hand, but soon in groups. Shardun walked down the road, blowing.

"Ever heard of the pied piper of Hamelin? He had nothing on me," he called to his American machine-room manager. "Count 'em and see how they are stacking up, but subtract the girls—no females wanted in our establishment."

"Sixty-four and still coming strong," shouted his assistant, who was enjoying the spectacle hugely.

"That's nothing," gasped Shardun, between his blowing. "I want 'em in hundeds. Then we shall be able to eliminate the trash."

He commenced jogging along at a gentle trot, making the countryside resound with his Wapiti call. And still the children came. They dropped their work in the fields; they dropped their loafing and playing; they came out of huts; out of the very furrows they seemed to spring with unintelligible shouts that were highly intelligible to all their kind.

"Six hundred thousand, I should say," cried the submanager, holding his sides from laughter. "This is the greatest stunt I've seen pulled in this darned country."

"Phew, I'm all in," exclaimed Shardun, seating himself on a bank. "That's more exercise than I've had for years. Now, Micky, the game's up to you. Tell them we need a hundred boys between ten and fourteen years. They'll get nothing but their chow, and two suits of clothes, but when I've finished with them their hands will be worth more to them than their blessed bodies are now."

The word passed magically round, and forthwith the interpreter was nearly mobbed. They all wanted work,

these stray samples of the hundreds of millions that Nature was endlessly procreating in a limitless land; they all knew that it meant freedom from the toil of the fields, freedom from stinted food—liberty to earn. They fought to be selected as passionately as if they were fighting for their lives. Blindly would they go to the ends of the earth for this work in perfect confidence because it was a foreigner (whom they called "devil" among themselves) pledging them his word.

"The greatest stunt I've ever seen," repeated the submanager, his imagination captured by the picturesqueness of the strategy. "And quick, too. Without all that backtalk they give you if you try their own ways."

"Got 'em straight, Micky?" called Shardun. "We've no time to lose. By the right, quick march."

He blew a last blast on his horn and started down the road back to the factory. Behind him, babbling incessantly in the greatest excitement, came the mob of successful candidates, with the unsuccessful at their heels.

If the imagination of the machine-room man had been captured by what Shardun only counted as half an hour's amusement, it was not less true of his whole establishment. The story, with various embellishments, passed from bay to bay in the machine-shops as the men worked. They were tickled to death by it; they shook their heads, scratched their sides and laughed as their lathes turned, and they hammered and sweated, saying to one another: "This one truly can take action. Who among us would have thought of such a way?"

In the villages the excitement was even greater. A legend was born overnight of a giant of a man, with only one arm, coming down the road, blowing his horn so that

all their children might follow him to fortune. These lucky ones had new suits of clothes, full rations three times a day just like the men, a place to sleep in, straw hats; and although there was no wages, there was tea-money which allowed them to stand round the hawkers in the evening, when their work was over, and buy sugared things. When would the giant with the one arm and the hairy knees walk down the road again, blowing his horn?

Meanwhile, the factory was reaching production stage. Strange tubes were being shot out in numbers, and tripods were fitted to them. Shell-cases commenced to appear. Then a measured mile away, a new shed was run up in record time with a barbed-wire fence ten feet round it, four hundred men working in shifts so rapidly that the roof was set in five days.

"Doesn't matter if she is jerry-built," commented Shardun, smoking his pipe and looking amused at the young German who was shaking his head. "What is worrying me is whether we're going to have any premature explosions. That would put the *kybosh* on things. I've got that Swede coming down himself, and he'll leave his own men in charge although he disclaims responsibility. With luck a few days more will see something happen. We've got to see about a testing-ground."

Shardun, as the critical hour approached, became visibly more excited. He talked even more incessantly than usual and never seemed to sleep.

"It's all very well improvising," he confided to his assistants. "But there comes a time when you want those technical fellows to check up on the ballistics and the stresses and that sort of stuff. We're lost if everything doesn't work out according to Hoyle. My fuses are all

right, but there are at least four other things that are worrying me. Thank God for that Swede who is a chemist."

At last the fateful day arrived, and with an improvised gun-crew they went off eleven miles away. The motor-truck was soon emptied of its fateful cargo, and targets were set up two thousand yards away under the shadow of a barren hill.

Shardun, with a pair of binoculars in his hands, issued orders incessantly.

"Got the range-tables, Fritz? Better give her a shade on the short side. Tell those darned Chinks to stand clear. Let her go as soon as you like."

There was a heavy explosion as the German detonated the charge. The shell flew through the air and burst with a great spurt of flame in the fields. Four times it was repeated, and then Shardun stopped proceedings with an oath.

"Short each time and something wrong with the way they spin," he bawled angrily. "I've guaranteed them effective up to two thousand, and here we are petering out at fourteen hundred. Can't you get less elevation?"

The German shook his head.

"That was right according to the tables."

They stood round fussing and talking.

"I'll pay a hell of a price for a good practical suggestion," said Shardun savagely.

"Put boosters on the shells with extra charges," said the American machine-room man, balancing one in his hand. "If that doesn't give steadiness and another six hundred yards I'll eat my hat."

He started sketching what he meant on a bit of wood.

"I see—vanes, you mean, paravanes. Got to be tried,"

agreed Shardun. "We've got to try everything. That ends today's proceedings. How long will it take to cut the steel?"

All the way back they were immersed in technical details. That evening a night shift began the work, and in forty-eight hours they had the pattern shells ready. Out to the barren hill they went again.

"Now let her go, Fritz," cried Shardun. "It's win or bust this time."

The German fired, the shell flew through the air and burst well over the target. Shardun did not speak until they had tested a full dozen. The error had been corrected and the shells were up to specification.

"America wins!" cried Shardun, immensely elated. "Now let's run up and examine the ground."

They walked along and Shardun was soon giving way to ecstasy.

"This has your old *minen-werfer* beaten to a frazzle, Fritz. Look at the area ploughed up, look at the spread of this one—a strong lateral burst, I should say. . . . We're going to deliver the goods and there'll be a bonus for everyone. The booster has come to stay."

That evening he despatched Micky, the interpreter, with an urgent message to General Wang. He was the bearer of a letter stating that the first delivery would take place on due date and to send down gun-crews for training at once.

"This will make them all sit up when they come into action," said Shardun, as they checked over what they had ready. "We can change the face of the blooming country. And I've cinched that Greek importer and his Hamburg wharf."

VII

If this man was toying with destiny through his explosives, and thrusting his white soul among souls not so white, so were others with things every whit as dynamic.

Mrs. Briller, completely caught by the glamour of curio-hunting, had given up the idea of going away. The mania had her in its grip; she feared to miss an opportunity which might never come again.

"This is certainly my last chance at the really good things," she said to Gladys. "Everyone here is realizing everything they have. Every chest is being opened, everything of value is coming on the market. You would be amazed if I told you all the people who have written to me to come and see their things. You see, they are all apprehensive; they see no permanence anywhere. Certainly it's a last chance."

She surrounded herself with catalogues of the great museums, and bought and bought and bought. Her discrimination gradually improved, and her first worthless purchases were discarded. She acquired the habit of the magnifying-glass, examining everything gravely as she saw the experts do, whilst she nodded her head knowingly. For her this whole people had been transformed into a race of artisans who throughout the ages had slaved and toiled to produce masterpieces—which she must acquire. How they must have laboured before they had extracted the secrets from their materials which had given them

such preëminence! Their present discontents, their latter-day dilemmas, were trival to her compared with the seriousness of their past. The great drama, the great tragedy was not their political disarray, but the fact that they were ceasing to produce.

"I'm after Castiglione's 'Hundred Horses,' by that Jesuit painter-priest who worked for the Emperor Ch'ien Lung," she told everybody. "It's the finest thing ever done in animals. It's in the palace still, but I can have it for a price. How much do you think it's worth?"

A strange disease this, indeed, to make its appearance in such an unexpected place; a disease never to be eradicated once it has fair hold of its victim. Mrs. Briller had all her possessions photographed to send to her friends; on that alone she spent great sums. She compared, listed, discussed, and even fought bitterly over her things. An evening spent with her meant an evening given over to inspecting all she had acquired, hearing recondite words such as patina, *Kao-lin,* seal characters, *famille rose, blanc de Chine,* and others of the same ilk, reverently pronounced. She had at her finger-tips the names of the artist-emperors of all the great dynasties; and when she spoke of the Sung House and displayed their celadon ware she dropped her voice as in awe. Art had entered into her being late in life much as an overdue basket of laundry comes at dusk into a house; hastily had she torn it from its covers and clothed herself anew.

Through it all she had certain qualms, certain feelings that in giving way to this sudden absorbing passion she was sacrificing something important in the world. Gladys was certainly going her own way, getting into her own rut —doing much the same things everyone else was doing here, yet with a certain difference which oppressed her.

It was all very well for her to ride and play games, and dance, but why did she seem so constantly to meet Mr. Trent?

Once she expostulated with her, but it bore no fruit.

"Gladys," she had said, seriously enough, "you'll land yourself in trouble one of these days. That woman would be boiling if she thought her husband came round here talking to you by the hour. She'll have her knife into you unless you stop."

"But we like one another," Gladys protested, colouring in spite of herself. "Where's the harm? One picks one's own friends in one's own way. You can't expect a person to tell you what's in your mind with a crowd chattering all round."

"Has Mr. Trent told you what's in his mind?" Mrs. Briller retorted, with unexpected sharpness.

Gladys looked at her, undisturbed.

"That's only my way of putting it; you know what I mean perfectly, Aunt Edith. He tells me of his travels, we talk of all sorts of things, politics, the rise and fall of empires. What's the sense of being here if one doesn't become interested in something? Besides, Dr. Kettling comes almost as often."

"Dr. Kettling's different. I would never say anything about Dr. Kettling."

After that the subject was dropped. Yet it was there all the time, a bone of contention.

One morning, when it was raining, Gladys said very definitely, as if she had made up her mind:

"I've been thinking of what you said. Do you want me to tell Mr. Trent that you don't like me having him for a friend? He hasn't been here for a week, so he's about due. I could tell him you had spoken to me."

Mrs. Briller looked concerned.

"I certainly wouldn't have him suppose I was so foolish. Don't you know a better way than that?"

"You must think all sorts of things," cried Gladys.

"I don't know what I think," retorted Mrs. Briller, "but I've told you what I feel."

Trent came that evening, just as a red sunset was driving away the last rain-clouds and filling the palaces with a vast, incredible richness of colouring such as one sees only in dreams.

"I thought you were never coming again; I was talking to my aunt about it this morning," said Gladys, with a woman's capacity for touching a subject in a most elusive way.

"I've had a lot of things to attend to," he said thoughtfully. "A regular procession of people have been coming to me wanting to sell their properties. I don't know why they should do that, except there's a tradition that I own a lot of houses here which I don't."

"Everything seems for sale," commented Gladys. "The old Capital seems on its last legs."

"Not quite," he rejoined, "but it's been badly hit. You can't expect a ten years' war not to leave its mark. Has your aunt found any more wonderful things, or is her enthusiasm beginning to wane?"

"It will never do that. There is an endless relay of dealers with mysterious blue bundles outside our rooms. She thinks everyone would be better for cultivating the hobby."

Trent lighted a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"By the bye, those bowls were recognized," he said suddenly. "I came to tell you about it. I kept them in my office for nearly a month before speaking."

"Ah!" exclaimed Gladys, changing her position. "I have wondered why you said nothing."

Trent looked at the magnificent palaces at their feet which had now turned crimson.

"Enid burnt the receipt, and is keeping the bowls," he said abruptly. "I'm not sure that wasn't the right thing to do. The dealer was honest, after all. It's a mystery why he had to wait so long to find a buyer."

Silence fell between the two.

"I shall never understand the way of things out here," she said at last.

He looked at her, surprised.

"Why?"

She laughed a little uneasily.

"I don't know exactly—if I did I wouldn't be puzzled. But it's all different. I'm different, I know. It's like a world of moles. Every so often there is a faint movement that one can see; but most things go on underground."

"And yet people, when they've gone away from here, always want to come back," he asserted.

"They've lost something, and they come back in the hope of finding it," she suggested.

He shook his head.

"That sounds like Kettling; has Kettling been talking to you? He's always making himself thoroughly miserable with his eternal analyzing."

"But I'm not miserable," she protested. "I thoroughly enjoy myself. I even think I enjoy our bandit experience —now that it's only a memory."

He smiled at her enthusiasm.

"That's because you are young. You've got a fresh point of view and clear eyes to see it. You'll be different some day."

"Have someone responsible for me—which will change everything?" she suggested.

"A man is responsible for a woman from the day he marries her," he said gravely, as if he were answering her question. "There's the last of the sun—it's slipping behind the hills."

They went out on the balcony and stood watching the scene.

"Those glorious palaces in this purple light; one lives in the spirit of the past," murmured Gladys, thinking of what he had said. "If I remained here long I'd be full of ghosts. I shall never understand why a people with such a magnificent conception, with such a shrine, should have cast it all in the dust-heap and be content with their squalor."

She looked at him, standing so upright, so serious. Had he always been like that—had be changed throughout the years?

"They were lured to it step by step," he explained. "The emperor, when he abdicated, was to be left here without the power but with the tradition in trust, in the hands of a president. They've had their presidents; but the theory broke down when the soldiers found that they were all-powerful and could parcel out the country among themselves. We're in that stage still—it may last a generation. But in the end someone will become strong enough to dominate them all, and then the shrine will come into its own again."

"I hope that's true," she said. "That's what your little general said. It sounded wild to me, but one never knows, here of all places in the world. Are you really going so soon?"

"I've got an appointment," he replied, looking at his watch. "I hate to be late——"

After this talk, which she never mentioned to her aunt, she began to take a fresh interest in observing Enid, in marvelling at the way she threw herself heart and soul into every social diversion, for which she always had time. Wherever she might be she was always careful to surround herself with men, as if that enabled her to maintain a certain mastery, to decide things as she wished. She scattered her dinner and luncheon invitations far and wide; she was always arranging something new. Gladys remembered what Shardun had said of her in his quaint way; certainly she held tightly to everything that came within her grasp.

But alone—how was she when she was alone with Trent? That part seemed to her daily more mysterious than all the rest.

One day she came upon Kettling very white in the face. For the first time in all their acquaintance he made as if he would pass her on the street and not speak.

"Dr. Kettling, Dr. Kettling," she cried after him. "You're not going away from me like that. What ever's the matter?"

He stopped and wheeled round, coming back slowly and reluctantly.

"I *was* going away like that," he confessed. "Talking won't mend matters for me."

He took off his hat and wiped his forehead with a faded silk handkerchief which somehow aroused her pity.

"What can have happened?" she exclaimed.

"Because I'm poor is no reason why I should be insulted," he answered, in a bitter voice. "This has been one of the few places in the world where it did not matter what one possessed. Rich and poor, we have been all the same to one another. But now that is to be changed."

He folded his hands over his old walking-stick, and stared at her young face through his spectacles.

"I'm still completely mystified; you're not going to leave it at that, are you?" she said.

"Why not?" he breathed.

"Because it's downright folly. Is it respectable to go into this Turk's coffee-room?"

She did not wait for his answer, but darted through a doorway which was decorated with a printed sign, "Best American ice-cream."

"Now," she continued, sitting down at a table, "we will try the great national product and meanwhile you can tell me all about it. Can you speak Turkish as well as every other language?"

Kettling laid his hat and stick on a chair.

"Turkish? A few words only, just enough to find my way about. It is a simple language, very primitive indeed, like all the Turanian group." He broke off and looked glum again. "But scholarship—what value has it! The ignorant hold the mastery of the world!"

"What exactly does that mean?"

Her candid blue eyes were fixed on him, and he surrendered with a wave of the hand.

"It means that Mrs. Trent is going round saying that I am a pensioner of her husband's—that I live entirely on his bounty, and that she is going to see that it stops.

The facts are entirely different. Trent has contributed with many others to a lecture and research fund which is under a committee, and from which I draw fees. That is the plain truth. There are many others in the same position."

"I'm so sorry," exclaimed Gladys. "Do you know what I'd do if I were you? I'd go straight to Mrs. Trent and have it out with her."

He shook his head.

"Impossible. I couldn't do it. In any case she would deny having said it. It would bring Trent into the dispute and destroy our friendship. She's very artful; she would outmanœuvre me. I am powerless against her. She is not pleased with things, not pleased with many of the people who are here. Under her abundant gaiety her heart is at war." He pushed his empty ice-cream glass aside. "Ah, it is good to be with you, to unburden myself; a deluge from heaven after a season of drought."

Gladys no longer smiled. She stared at the window glass as if he had placed some disturbing image there. Not pleased with many of the people here—there it was again, like a mole, suddenly disclosing itself. Her sunshade had slipped to the ground and lay neglected at her feet. Even when a servant approached and picked it up, she paid no attention.

"What curious thing has happened?" exclaimed Kettling. "You were so gay just now; you were chiding me because I could not dare to take a risk. But now your spirit has fled somewhere else."

"I was thinking of all sorts of things," she said. "Let's talk of something else. Tell me what do you teach, and that will perhaps bring my spirit back."

Kettling at once became interested.

"Comparative religions, and Eastern and Western philosophies. It was quite marvellous to teach these students some years ago; they have such plastic minds. My classes were always crowded—attention was rapt; and often many of the students followed me home to continue the discussion far into the night. Some were clever, too, with ingenious ideas. It was an education to lay before them well-known facts, which they had never heard of before, and to see what novelty they imparted merely by clothing them in their own ideas. Oh, but that was years ago. Now there is a new spirit, a terrible spirit which is transforming a gentle race of book-worms into fanatics, a truly murderous spirit. You see, they have discovered Karl Marx—twenty thousand students in the Capital have made the discovery simultaneously. The classes are neglected. They march in bands and hold meetings to celebrate these pernicious teachings which they are foolish enough to believe will bring them salvation. Perhaps Mrs. Trent is right, perhaps I have lost my value." He sighed deeply.

"But it's the same thing that has spread all over the world," she rejoined. "Can't you reason with them?"

He shook his head.

"That's the whole point. It's the only doctrine I know of that has enough truth to defeat reasoning."

"Then what?"

"Things must take their course—we must bow our heads to the storm. And it will be a vast storm, something very different from what has occurred hitherto."

Presently they sauntered out.

"I had no idea it got piping hot so soon," remarked Gladys. "I like the feeling, but I feel an immense laziness stealing over me which is quite new."

"Wait until the cicadas commence, and then you will see what heat means," said Kettling.

Under the trees, using every imaginable thing as a prop to lean against, wayfarers were sitting or lying down fanning themselves, each in a pool of silence. The children of the street, already stripped stark naked, ran round joyously in circles as if they were dogs chasing their shadows. Sometimes they paused to gaze at the two strangers in the land as they passed; but their looks were veiled and full of suspicion.

Kettling had recovered his calm and commenced talking briskly.

"You ought to think of going to some cooler spot during the summer," he remarked.

"Do you go away?"

"Sometimes—for short spells."

She looked at him.

"Does Mrs. Trent go away?" she inquired, in a very serious voice.

At that he frowned and scanned her narrowly, as if in doubt regarding her motives.

"Yes—she does, invariably. Then every second year she goes to Europe or America. She has done so regularly for years and years. This year is the second year. Here we are. I'll just come in for a moment to read the news."

Because he did that, the day's complications deepened. For as they were idling, standing there, another swing-door opened and Trent came hastening along.

"What are you doing here?" cried Gladys.

He held up an envelope.

"I've been cancelling a passage to England. I've just managed to do it in time without forfeiting a deposit."

"Were you thinking of going away?" she inquired, in a steady voice.

"No," he answered decidedly. "It was for Enid. Shan't we all sit down and have something cool to drink?"

Kettling was looking around as if trying to find a way of escaping.

"The fact is I've delayed my work and I should really go home—" he began.

Trent took him by the arm.

"What's an hour in a cycle of Cathay? You've said that often to me," he said jokingly. "You work too much, anyway."

Gladys looked at these two men who understood each other so well, and she thought of the labyrinth of dusty years behind them. She decided to speak.

"I'm so glad we met like this," she said.

"Anything I can do to help you?" inquired Trent innocently.

"There most certainly is." She looked at Kettling. "Poor Dr. Kettling; it's not fair on him to have people misinterpreting him, is it? Can't you have it stopped?"

Trent suddenly became serious.

"What's this, Kettling?" he inquired. "Who's been talking?"

Kettling shook his head.

"It's nothing—nothing at all. I've forgotten all about it."

"No, he hasn't," contradicted Gladys. "Don't you believe him. A word between you two would do an infinitude of good. Just a word. You see? Now I'm going along."

She retreated swiftly before there was time to reply.

VIII

TRENT took very calmly the little Kettling told him.

"You know Enid well enough by now to pay no attention to what she says on some subjects," he remarked. "But it makes it awkward for a man to hear these things——"

"I'm sorry," said Kettling, in a humble way. "But when a man writhes, when a man would like to call out—" He stopped and ended, in a changed voice: "You see, we are, after all, human beings, and each of us is affected in his own way."

"You're foolish," rejoined Trent. Then they walked in silence until his gateway.

"Now," he said, as if he had been turning it over in his mind, "I'm going to take the bull by the horns and speak to Enid. But never again has anyone else to be dragged in. Go into the library and wait for me for a few minutes."

In the garden two children were running and shrilly calling to one another. As soon as they caught sight of the scholar they raced towards him.

"Dr. Kettling, Dr. Kettling," cried the girl, who was the older of the two, "come and tell us about the well and all the spooks that used to be here once upon a time."

"Yes, do," cried the boy. "You promised you would last time."

"Did I?" replied the savant. "Look here, Rosamund and Johnnie. I can't today. I'd have to tell you the whole story and it's very long. Your father and I have serious business to talk about."

"Anything gone wrong?" inquired the girl, with a wisdom beyond her years. "Things always seem to be going wrong, don't they?"

"That is their peculiarity," remarked Kettling, patting her on the head, and wondering suddenly what picture was in her brain. "Now once upon a time there was a dynasty——"

"He's going to tell it," cried the boy. "That's the way the story commences——"

When Trent re-appeared, Kettling was gravely walking up and down the pathway between the two children, completing his story as quickly as he could.

"Now run away, you two," said Trent. "You can have the story finished later on."

He went with Kettling into his library and sat down silently.

Kettling breathed deeply. He felt full of contrition. Why had he made so much of a matter which was small and insignificant? Softened by his quarter of an hour with these two enchanting children, the fruit of a union he abhorred, his mind was filled with the delicate images he had conjured up for their delectation, and at peace with the world.

"Did you ever at any time talk about Enid to Mrs. Briller?" said Trent unexpectedly.

Kettling sat up in his chair and gently rubbed his hands to bring himself back to reality.

"Not that I can remember. We talk about curios, about all sorts of things. No, I don't think I ever did—"

Suddenly he clasped his hands. "Yes, I did. I remember distinctly. It was in the train—that night on the Green Express before we were captured. She had not met you yet. She asked who you both were. I spoke of the time I had known you, and of our associations and of the revolution. Yes, I remember now."

Trent looked at him doubtfully.

"Enid says you spoke against her; she says you tried to poison Mrs. Briller's mind. She was very bitter. She declared that anything she had done was just reprisal."

Kettling rose nervously. In the garden the two children were still running about. They kept suspiciously near as if in the hope that the weaver of tales would soon be left free to resume his story.

He watched them for a long time, wondering about the mystery which was able to bring what was lovable out of what was hateful.

"What I said I said deliberately," he remarked at last. "There was no malice in it, no malice at all. I remember every word. My remarks were an interrogation; there was nothing affirmed; I spoke of many things in the past as a man will do—there was no poison in my remarks."

"There are others in the world," said Trent, "and everybody's point of view is not yours."

"Ah, can't we let it drop?" exclaimed Kettling fervently. "It was a chance meeting which is really to blame. Miss Cunningham dragged it out of me. No doubt I was wrong to speak, but then one makes mistakes."

"You had better leave her out of it—I did," said Trent.

Kettling nodded his head.

"I'm glad you did that, very glad, because that might have made a further complication."

"Exactly," said Trent, looking very serious. "What's happening out there?"

The two children were hammering on the door.

"There's a motor-car with soldiers in it coming into the compound," they called excitedly. "A beautiful new car——"

The sound of an engine became audible. Then a great shiny black car came round the corner slowly and cautiously, like a ship nosing its way through the shoals. A soldier sprang from the running-board. He threw open the door, and General Wang in full uniform stepped out.

He advanced holding out both hands, as he saw the two friends. His orderly followed him closely, almost treading on his heels.

Trent and Kettling walked towards him.

"This is a great surprise, no doubt," began General Wang, exchanging hand-shakes, as the children ran away. "It is a great surprise for me also. Yesterday at this hour I had no thought of you. But telegrams reached me from the Capital. I decided to act at once. I spent the night travelling here." He turned and took from his orderly a black portfolio such as old-fashioned lawyers carry. Then he continued, "I hope this motor-car does not inconvenience you inside the compound. It is better for it to remain near. I brought it with me on the train. Eight thousand dollars it cost; is the price excessive? I obtained it from a German although it is an American make. But do I interrupt? Did you two gentlemen have business which I have disturbed?"

"No, no, we were only attending to a trivial matter,"

said Trent. "Come in, come in. How is Shardun and the factory getting on?"

General Wang's expression changed. It was almost imperceptible, but both men noted it.

"Shardun, a man of great energy," he exclaimed. "A man of great ability, a man who is inexhaustible. I have respect for the English. Among his workmen I have some planted there without his knowledge, watching all the time. All report the same thing. Never night or day is he still, never does he forget duty for pleasure. Always is he contriving new things, trying new ideas. His materials are excellent. How lucky I am to have found him through our friendship! Constantly does he assist me in the training of my artillery, in the handling of guns. It is splendid to see such excellence. His strength is so great that when others are exhausted he is still lively. He has only one little fault——"

He paused and looked from Trent to Kettling, and then back from Kettling to Trent. His features showed a droll and indefinable concern. They felt that an august moment had arrived when he was about to tell the truth.

"It is the money part that worries me," he confessed solemnly. "It is unthinkable what he spends. He declares that his profit is small; yet he has recently bought a ship. A ship—why should he buy a ship? He has told other that it has great convenience for him. It is to bring what he wants freely from foreign countries, without let or hindrance. It is true that for the shells a powder is needed which comes only from *Nau-wei,* and that there is risk of seizure because foreign nations have agreed among themselves. But to buy a ship—what wastefulness! If anything happens to her he loses all; if he but chartered one the loss would fall on another." He opened

his portfolio. "Here I have all the figures of what has been spent. The sum is beyond belief. My troops suffer from a shortage of everything because I must constantly pay. All my supplies are delayed. I am besieged by creditors. There is a crisis not far off. If I take by force to supply my men I may suffer, since that time has not yet arrived. Shardun is good, but his money fault is serious."

He handed a paper written in ideograms over to Kettling, who ran his eye down the endless, finely written columns and looked at the total in amazement.

"Three millions?" he exclaimed.

"Yes—three millions," assented General Wang.

"He has spent that much?" said Trent, astounded.

"Yes, that much. It was agreed that the factory should be mine—that all the purchases were to be on my account. The price of the factory was settled, so was the price of everything. But Shardun has added many things, and when I became impatient he asks me if I wish to sell. Why does he ask me that?"

He looked from one to the other, and then back again as he had done once before.

"Perhaps he is not serious," suggested Kettling.

"Perhaps he has a buyer," said Trent.

General Wang sprang to his feet.

"That is what I wish to know—has he a buyer and who is he? That knowledge is more important to me than the question of money. He has lately used the argument several times. Who is the buyer?"

He began walking up and down the room with short, sharp steps, using his hands as he talked.

"Among friends of many years' standing there is no reason to conceal a single thought; why should I now

conceal what is in my heart? All goes well for me if things can remain as at present; it is doubtless known to you that some expansion of my forces was consented to by the Government in spite of the new military governor. In certain matters I have anticipated consent. On the lists I have one full division, ten thousand men. But I have retained my brigade separate, and the artillery is organized differently so that it is of double strength. The men from the provincial capital are deserting day by day; they see that I give good treatment and that rapid promotion is possible. Yet much remains to be done; it is impossible to advance as fast as a horse runs without falling. The factory is necessary to me; Shardun is necessary. We are arming many with what he can buy very cheaply from others because the arms have defects." Then he stood still and said in an oracular way, "To know the name, if truly there is a buyer, is more important to me than all the money involved."

"Why?" inquired Trent.

"Yes—why?" repeated Kettling, who was so interested that he had forgotten his own troubles.

General Wang stood staring so intently at the two men that he seemed hypnotized. Then suddenly he relaxed. His black eyes laughed so much that they became mere slits; his whole being was laughing at this amazing density which could not see what he could see as clearly as if it were the sun shining in his face. Then he said:

"If Shardun tells the truth it means that someone more powerful than myself faces me—that someone I have not yet suspected is watching me—someone with money. Who is it—what is his party—what is his plan? These things are more important to me than the factory itself. I have come to the Capital to discover."

"You spoke of telegrams," Trent remarked.

General Wang snorted contemptuously.

"Telegrams—telegrams—these never cease. From every quarter I receive them daily, hourly. Since my strength increased many communicate with me, many offer to become sworn brothers. My telegrams can wait. But this other is urgent, pressing; I must know at once. I have a dangerous matter on hand. I will tell you two gentlemen; my life is in your hands."

He went to the window and peered out. In the distance his brand-new motor-car had been captured by the two children, who had climbed into the driver's seat and were sounding the horn, while his orderly, the Rat, stood by and grinned. Save for them, there did not appear to be a living soul about.

He turned and came back with quick, short steps, and his sentences were quick and short, to show that he was utterly truthful. Yet even when he was telling the truth, he was careful to omit what it was prudent to omit.

"It is the matter of the provincial capital. Many months ago, before the affair of the bandits, the governor played against me—and my troops were attacked. I took some part in making a suitable reply—to let him eat bitterness. The bandit attack on the train was known to me; it was known to me that it would ruin him, and I consented to it. But others had a hand in it as well. They had their eye not only on his ruin but on the provincial capital. So you see, whilst I got revenge, they won the capital. And now it is my turn."

"You will attack the provincial capital?" exclaimed Kettling.

Once again General Wang smiled until his eyes almost completely disappeared.

"I, a rebel against authority? Never—never! To use Government troops against legal authority is impossible. But if there is a rising in the provincial capital; if I am called upon to suppress it and occupy it with my troops, then what—to whom does the provincial city belong?"

Again his eyes narrowed, but this time not from laughter. His head was craned forward like a watchful animal's—his hands gripped the air.

"You see, you understand," he said, in a low voice. "I shall put down a revolt in the provincial capital on the fifteenth day of this month. That is in ten days. Money will be more plentiful after that. I shall print military notes and the people will accept them. You see—you see my plan which I dare not tell Shardun?"

"Take care," said Trent.

"How can you save yourself from failing!" exclaimed Kettling.

General Wang had fallen into a chair and closed his eyes. He was hot from his excitement. The perspiration stood in little beads on his forehead, and ran down his cheeks. He seemed exhausted, frightened almost by his own words. Reclining like that, he looked the nickname his soldiers had once given him—the Hedgehog. He was a hedgehog who had made a fearful leap, if only in fancy, and who felt the need for repose.

Suddenly he opened his eyes and blinked them fast, first at one man and then at the other.

"I shall not fail," he announced. "But it will not be easy. A city is harder than the country districts. In the country the people are scattered, defenceless. In the towns, they think. If the police resist, I shall shoot every one of them, not merely the chief but every living man. Yes. This time there shall be no quarter. My concern

regarding Shardun is important. I need your help instantly. It is necessary for you to see Shardun without delay. At a word from you he can be here in two hours by road. He will drive here himself with his one hand. I have seen him drive— Give me a telegram. I will go to him with the speed of a horse——"

He stood with his hands out.

"I'll do it," said Trent. He rose and went to a desk. But when he was there, he played with his pen and said in English, "Now, Kettling, do you think I'm justified in sending for him like this? What's his real game? Why should we allow ourselves to be used?"

To which Kettling replied:

"It's as you like. But there's more truth than lies in anything he's said today. Besides he's anxious about Shardun; he's anxious about the money as well. He's certainly got a plan that is almost ripe."

"I'll risk it," said Trent, commencing to write.

General Wang hardly waited for the last word to be set down before he plucked the paper from the table, walked to the door, and called.

The Rat, who had been induced to take off his cap and his belt by the two children, started up guiltily and ran round in a circle in his distress.

"Come here, fool," cried his commanding officer. "Take this to the telegraph office. To be despatched urgently." He threw him some money. "To be back in fifteen minutes. Drive there."

The Rat saluted and ran, buckling his belt as he did so. The car backed and slipped away; General Wang returned to his chair with an audible sigh.

"That is better. My heart is calmed. The answer will not be long in coming," he exclaimed to Trent, beginning to play with something idly on a table.

Kettling walked up and down the room, and at length went to the door, in which was a great pane of glass in the Chinese style. He stood looking through it at some magpies fluttering above a hoary locust-tree, wondering about what would happen to this little man who so deliberately challenged fate. In the distance he heard a harsh voice expostulating; and as he peered down the pathway he saw the gatekeeper following protestingly two women, one young, the other very old, both most soberly dressed.

"Did you not see the electric car go out?" cried the man despairingly, because he had no authority to admit people like this.

"He is here," protested the young woman, turning on him in anger. "He is here even as he was an hour ago when you sent back a message that it was not he; I go to complain."

Then, as she caught sight of Kettling peering at her through the glass, she coloured and her footsteps faltered. But almost at once she recovered herself.

Kettling had thrown open the door.

She curtsied in the native way, bending both her knees and placing her two hands together over one.

"I am searching for our master," she announced, in a modest voice. "By chance we heard he had unexpectedly arrived, and I await his pleasure."

Kettling glanced hurriedly over his shoulder. This was no other than the young woman General Wang had so unexpectedly married.

"We were engaged on some business about which he is concerned. He is here inside," he remarked politely.

But the young woman would not pass the doorway. She stood just out of view with the old woman close behind her. And behind the old woman was the gatekeeper, ready to defend himself against the charge that he had

not held his gate against all comers; ready to show how these two had slipped in without so much as a word while he was busily engaged in preparing his food.

"There is somebody come for you, General," said Kettling very politely in the vernacular, thinking that this was a day of surprises. "There is somebody here."

General Wang grunted. He was standing with Trent at the other end of the room, and he showed not the slightest inclination to move.

"Yes, I heard," he announced in a voice which reached everyone. "But today official affairs engage me. I have no time for family affairs."

Whereupon, without any warning, the young woman who was out of view put the pink handkerchief she was carrying to her eyes and commenced quietly weeping.

Kettling stood greatly embarrassed.

"Please come in and sit down," he suggested. "Then when business is concluded there will be time to talk."

She shook her head and began sobbing more loudly.

Inside, Trent began expostulating.

"Say a few words. It is necessary at least to show that when the business is over you will attend to whatever she has in mind."

But General Wang was adamant. The deadlock was absolute.

"I have spoken," he remarked, not even apologizing for the scene.

Trent walked to the door and relieved his feelings by angrily telling the gatekeeper to go back to his duties. But the young woman, what was he to do with her? If she would neither come in or go away she would have to stay where she was. Now they heard the horn of the returning motor-car as it raced back down the lane; almost

immediately it had sped through the gateway, back to the spot where it had originally stood. The orderly leaped down, and taking a receipt from inside his cap ran briskly to the library.

General Wang gave a grunt and laid the paper on the table. But the main action had not shifted by as much as an inch. His indignant spouse remained just out of view; dominating the door and retaining her strategic advantage with silent perseverance.

"Are we all going to remain like this until Shardun turns up?" said Trent in English to Kettling. "You can do nothing with this people when they get an idea into their heads."

Kettling shrugged his shoulders.

"She feels offended about something. Every minute that passes increases her advantage. He is steadily losing esteem by being unable to meet the situation."

Suddenly, the man who was about to provoke a revolt and capture a provincial capital, surrendered. He did it obliquely so to speak—adopting the most indirect method possible.

"Is there a little room in there which is free?" he inquired of Trent, pointing to the other end of the pavilion where he knew perfectly well there was a little room. "If so, perhaps it would be very generous to allow it to be occupied——"

He did not even finish his sentence, leaving it to these men to finish it for him just as he left his other affairs to them.

Trent smiled broadly and went to the door where the young woman still stood motionless, although she had heard every word.

"Won't you come in?" he said, very politely. "As soon

as General Wang has finished with us he will be able to go home with you."

She bowed and murmured her thanks in a low voice. Then, without looking to the right or left, closely followed by the old woman servant, she walked into the library and straight to the door of the little room which was opened and closed behind her.

Trent looked at his watch.

"It's one o'clock," he remarked in English to Kettling. "We've people coming to lunch, and perhaps you'd better take the opportunity and let bygones be bygones."

"It's impossible," rejoined Kettling. "Besides, I'm not hungry. I couldn't eat a morsel. I'll go home."

"You can't do that. We must settle this thing. You've got to stop here."

Kettling dropped into a chair beside a book-case, and pulled out a book.

"Well—I'll read."

Trent changed into the vernacular. "I have guests," he remarked to General Wang. "I would ask you to join us, only that the foreign food would not be to your liking."

But General Wang declared that there was nothing in the world that he desired so much as a European lunch. He accepted with much pleasure, he added, since he had eaten nothing all that day.

Trent opened the door on to the garden with suppressed amusement, and called back to Kettling, who was sitting with the book still in his hand:

"If you change your mind, ring and tell them to bring you what you want. Don't forget the lady in the other room."

IX

Kettling read a few sentences, and then became restive. He dropped the book on his knees and folded his hands. He was certainly not in a reading mood, he reflected; there was too much action in the air. He never recollected so many surprising things happening in such a short space of time. He also realized, as he was going without his customary meal, that he was more hungry than he had been for a long time—ravenous, in fact.

He looked at the bell and thought of Trent's last words. Then he decided that it would be weakness to ring, particularly as he had said that he was not hungry.

He sighed, and to take his mind from thinking, got up and went to the door leading into the little room. He opened it cautiously, as if not sure what he would find inside, and gently put his head through.

The young woman was sitting at a window, patiently looking out on the garden. Her servant was seated on the rug at her feet, her hands folded on her lap and her eyes partially closed.

Both rose courteously when they saw him, as custom demanded.

"I came to see if I could be of service," he announced, using such formal expressions that some words were lost on them. "Waiting is sometimes a slow and tedious affair. There may be much time to be wasted."

The young woman inclined her head.

"It is beautiful in the garden. I am looking at the

flowers, and the birds fluttering on the trees. Time is not important to me. I thank you for your attention."

"They have gone for food," he explained. "Presently they will return; very soon, in fact."

"And you?" she said, pointing her fingers at him in a gesture which was not rude because it was essentially Oriental.

"I—I am not hungry," he replied gravely.

"You ate early, then, the way we do—half-way through the morning?"

"Yes," he assented, thinking of the ice-cream he had partaken of so many hours ago. "Yes—I ate half-way through the morning."

He paused, not knowing what he should say next.

"You have not been away from our street since your marriage?" he inquired at last.

At that her face became a mask—not a trace of expression did she leave there.

"No," she replied, "after the general's departure I remained at home."

"It is a hard time for military men," he suggested smoothly. "For them there is only camp-life and the care of their soldiery. Family affairs go into the background when there is so much else important."

"There is time for many things in life," she replied enigmatically.

Kettling considered her carefully, as if this were an idea that demanded thought.

"That is true," he assented, "but many things have a special time."

"Certainly. That is why I sought our master here. Time does not wait for certain things." She stood very stiffly.

Kettling was deeply surprised. In spite of her gentleness she seemed very set today. "Time does not wait for certain things"—that was almost an aphorism. What had her husband done to prompt that? He rubbed his hands and wondered if he could retreat without saying any more. But just then the old servant-woman plucked at her mistress's sleeve, saying in an undertone:

"It is best to sit down. Fatigue is undesirable. Already you have moved too much today, and there has been much excitement. This is a time when care must be taken."

The young woman sat down. Something in the way she did that caused a great light to dawn on Kettling, a pink light it must have been. For his face went pink and he felt pink—exactly the shade of the handkerchief the young woman clasped in her hands. So she was going to have a child; she was outraged at such a solemn moment, when a son might be coming to keep faith with the great chain of ancestors, that her lord and master should leave her neglected as if she was not of this world.

"You have acted rightly," he said solemnly. "I shall request them to bring some refreshment so that you may not be fatigued."

Then the old servant said with that democratic unconcern all her race possess:

"It is well that there are some who pay attention to the customary observances. We are thankful to the gentleman." She tapped her mistress's hand. "The palm is fully marked before the child is born. The signs are auspicious in every way. Short feet and long hands in the mother indicate nobility; who would not at such a moment show concern? It is well that there are some who pay attention."

Whereupon the two women bowed and Kettling withdrew, prepared at last to ring the bell.

The bell was never rung. For, hearing a fresh commotion and the loud tooting of a horn, he not unnaturally went out into the garden, and before he was prepared for it a long, low racing car, painted crimson, slid round the corner and came to rest alongside the shiny black car. Out of it jumped Shardun in an enormous sun-helmet and his inseparable khaki shorts, and commenced pulling things about at a great pace.

Kettling stood thunderstruck. Less than an hour had passed since the telegram had been sent. How in the name of Heaven had he managed it?

"Hullo, Kettling," called Shardun cheerfully. "I've run the bird down; this is his bus, isn't it? I'll be with you in a minute."

Talking incessantly as he gathered up his things, and issuing orders to a remarkable individual, tanned to the colour of mahogany and clad in a khaki uniform, Shardun at last turned.

"Where's everybody?" he inquired. "What, feeding? And what about you and me? Some run I've had. She's an eight-cylinder. I averaged sixty an hour till we hit the city gates. Ran over two pigs and any number of fowls. The villagers will murder me on the way back. Let me dump this stuff out of sight."

Thereupon he made towards the door of the little room.

"You can't go in there," cried Kettling hastily. "There's somebody there."

"The devil there is," said Shardun, stopping short. "What's it all about?"

He dropped his things in a corner and came back to Kettling.

"The fact is," explained Kettling, "there's been a little complication here today, which is too long to explain. But I don't think you had better disturb anybody until Trent comes back."

"Suit yourself," murmured Shardun. "It's all the same to me if you want to keep your secret. How's the little general?"

"We only sent a telegram an hour ago," said Kettling. "I confess I'm full of curiosity to know how you got through so quickly."

"Telegram—I never got a telegram," said Shardun. "I got word from my men that the general had passed through on the up train; they find these things out by magic, I believe. So I hot-footed up without waiting to know the reason why. So he asked you to wire for me—stranger and stranger still. He's driving at one thing, and I'm after another. The question is where do we meet? Meanwhile what about eats? I'm strong for food. Look here; I'll send my man and get something as they've got guests—" He went to the door and shouted, "Nelson, come on, Admiral." The man in khaki came running up. "Here, go behind and tell them tiffin for two over here in a hurry, and I want iced beer." He turned to Kettling. 'He'll get something in double quick time. Why do I call him Nelson? Because he's got only one eye and breaks the rules of war. Quite a thought—what? Now, Kettling, be a good chap, and tell me all about it. What's doing? Why the telegram and why the closed room? Is the corpse in there?"

Kettling smiled.

"Don't be foolish. We've had two hours' discussion. Your little man is all wrought up about several things. He thinks you're very expensive."

"Oh, it's about money, is it?" said Shardun. "I didn't think it was worrying him enough to have him chase up here and bother Trent about it. Well, since he's raised the issue I'm strong for settling it. Meanwhile, here come the life-savers."

The miracle had been accomplished, and all the paraphernalia for an extempore lunch were hurried into the room. Shardun, a beer bottle in his one hand, was in high spirits.

"Nothing like beer on a hot day," he explained. "I'm going to drink a gallon. Have some, Kettling? This is the life. I wish you'd talk more and tell me what's doing. You're a funny old stick, so cautious there's no knowing what you've got up your sleeve. Why didn't you go and feed with the others? I tell you, I've made that little man some priceless stuff. We're turning out mortars like hot cakes, and our shell output is up 280% since last month. Hand-grenades, too, in any quantity, a darned sight better than the War Disposals people say they won't ship from home. Do you think they're going to fight?"

After they had eaten and talked a great deal, Kettling gave a sigh of contentment; and sweeping all the crumbs he could find into his handkerchief, went into the garden to throw them to the birds. Shardun, seeing his opportunity, tiptoed across the room and threw open the door of the little room.

"Oh," he said, in great surprise, using unintelligible English since he could use nothing else. "Sorry to disturb you. Now I remember—you're the general's missus waiting for the little general."

The young woman had recognized him as well. She curtsied to him and pointed to her ears as being unable to follow him.

"Yes—I know. It's too bad, but the eyes are still good. Would you like a little present? I've got something; might as well kept it in the old firm."

He reached into his breast-pocket and drew forth a tiny jade ring which he had proposed to give to Enid. Now he invited the young woman with signs to put it on her little finger.

Apparently she found it very amusing to do so. And so when Kettling, with concern on his face, peered through the doorway he found the one-armed giant comparing the enormous size of his own fingers with the little woman's and laughing heartily.

"Why didn't you tell me it was only her?" Shardun exclaimed. "There's more mystery about today than I have ever seen before. What's the matter with all you people? Quite natural, isn't it, in this country for a woman to sit and wait until her husband gets through?"

Kettling agreed.

"Certainly, certainly. But there's been quite a complication today about her coming here, and I didn't want to add to it. Here they come—now we can get on with it."

The afternoon was well advanced before they had got on with it perceptibly. General Wang only approached the subject which was uppermost in his mind indirectly. He commenced by making a long speech which Kettling translated as faithfully as he could.

"He says that peace cannot last much longer, and that suddenly, at the least expected moment, a great war is going to break out among them all which may far eclipse

all the others they have so far had. The signs are on every side. Everybody is seeking allies in every camp; everyone is collecting munitions; and a factory such as his is looked at jealously by all. The utmost caution is necessary. No doubt at some moment a desperate attempt might be made to destroy his factory. It is necessary to be on the alert."

Shardun was not all impressed. He rubbed his hairy knees and remarked:

"I've heard that flapdoodle a dozen times before. Tell the general they've got as much chance of breaking into my place as of getting into the Bank of England. I've electrified the whole compound, and no Chink I've ever heard of would dare to tackle the job. What I want to know is why he didn't stop off and see me on his way up."

Whereupon there was another long speech, from which it was to be inferred that General Wang's movements, being of great interest to a great many people, it was quite impossible for him ever to go near the factory again by day. Therefore, if he had taken this roundabout and tedious way of meeting his manager, it was because by so doing not one word of what passed would be known to his fellow-countrymen, whom it was always well to keep in profound ignorance.

"Quite so, I'm with you there," rejoined Shardun. "But admitting all that, ask him, Kettling, what precisely are the subjects for discussion today?"

Whereupon General Wang drew a deep breath and his face became a perfect blank.

"I wish to talk about the factory," he said.

"Quite so," rejoined Shardun, "tell him to fire ahead. I've got all my papers here."

But when he rose to get them General Wang waved his hands as a sign that he did not wish to see them. Shardun, seating himself again, wrapped himself in silence; and now the atmosphere seemed to be portentous.

"Shall I ask him?" inquired Trent in the vernacular, thinking that the time had come to dispense with circumlocution.

"It is soon," objected General Wang. "We must feel our way a little more. If I spoke now my purpose would be clear. That I do not desire—I have reasons which go beyond the business in hand."

"Your policy is wrong," said Trent.

The general looked at him knowingly.

"But this is a particular kind of business. The issue is not as you understand it, but as I can see it. To allow any corner of my mind to be visible would be an act of folly. An act of folly," he repeated, rising and picking up the book Kettling had left lying about, as if he wished to attempt to read.

He turned the pages idly, stopping and lifting the book to his nose as if to study an illustration. Under his eyelashes he shot a look at Shardun, who with his legs crossed was idly smoking a pipe.

"Ask him," he said suddenly, "what he would do if I could not find the money to continue; if, being drained by the requirements of my camp, I had to abandon, without further payments, all we have managed to build up?"

It was translated. Over the edge of the book which he could not read General Wang watched with the intentness of a patrol who has got in touch with the enemy.

Filtered through another brain and into another language, the interrogation acquired an importance which was overwhelming. Shardun uncrossed his legs, put down his

pipe on a table, and grasped a knee in his hand. A frown had come on his face, not an ordinary frown, but something ominous, which darkened his cheerful features and seemed to make him the personification of brutal strength, ready to defend what was more precious to him than life.

"Does he mean that seriously?" he said in a low voice. "Does he mean it?"

General Wang attracted attention to himself by dropping the book with a long bang on the table. He was smiling now, smiling broadly, showing his white teeth and wrinkling up his forehead so much that his eyes had become mere slits.

"There is no buyer," he murmured. "No buyer at all. Can you not see that as clearly as I? Tell him that I was not serious, that I have some money for him but that more economy must be exercised, now that the decisive hour approaches. Tell him, but not too clearly, that if I succeed all will be well, but that if I fail difficulties will overwhelm him as well as me."

"My God, what was he playing at to ask me that question?" was the only comment Shardun made. "I thought for a minute that I had really put on the screws too hard and squeezed him to death."

For a few minutes they discussed a technical matter.

"Anything more?" said General Wang.

"Not a thing," said Shardun with a grin, pocketing the money-order the other had given him. "We're absolutely through."

X

FREE from what had burdened his mind, General Wang now went to the door of the little room and grunted some unintelligible words. Forthwith the wife he had so unceremoniously married followed him obediently out. Then he flung some directions to his orderly, the Rat, who, standing with an expression of unconcealed curiosity, saluted and drove off. Still with his wife at his heels and the old woman servant following behind, he went out of this foreigner's domain rapidly, as if it were something he cast out of his life, to the house across the street.

Inside this building, the old woman servant securely barred the street-door with its heavy wooden bar, a symbolic act like all the acts in the life of this people, a declaration that what took place within was totally cut off from what might be without.

General Wang, in this privacy, seemed a totally different person—he had become absent-minded and relaxed. He seated himself on a blackwood couch, and idly sipped the cup of tea that was placed at his elbow, blinking his eyes repeatedly as if he were sleepy.

His wife's attitude was also changed. Her silence was rich with a meaning totally different from what it had been elsewhere; it seemed like a soundless lullaby, something in harmony with her daily life.

"You see, I was very busy, and dealing with foreigners is not easy," observed General Wang at last, as if they

had been talking all the time. "There are many points to be remembered. If one forgets anything, if one proceeds differently from what they expect, one's effort is lost."

She nodded, sitting down some distance away from him. Now she began talking without hesitation, as if he had asked her a question to which she was making reply.

"It is this way with me. I am with child. I cannot stay here with the neighbours and relatives who have known me before, for there has been much talk since you married me. I, being a widow, cannot reply to some of their arguments, so I must go. You can find a place more conveniently than I can. Therefore I came to seek you directly I heard you had unexpectedly come to the city."

At this he came near showing genuine emotion.

"What, you are with child? Well, well—this is good. I was not thinking of such things. If it is a son my luck will be proved. A son!" He opened his eyes coyly, and laughed at her as if she were a pretty thing. "You see children are good—ever so many would not be too many for me. Yes—I certainly like this."

He continued to look at her, but she paid no attention to him, going on with her own tale impersonally as if it were a story which had been aching to be told, something absorbing her completely.

"After you left here many days ago they bothered me in many small ways. There was much mischievous and envious talk. Our relatives spoke sharply because no notification had been given to them. In many ways was I bothered. Then there were requests for the loan of money; it was said that you had acquired much. I stayed peacefully at home, sewing and embroidering, but the envious tongues pursued me. I ordered the maid-servants

to admit no one, but the relatives who live here would not be denied and much trouble came. Finally, I decided to run away to you. But today, hearing that you had come, I went first to acquaint you about it."

The old woman had entered the room. Now she came up to the general, remembering his previous generosity, and said to him, "Will you drink wine?" showing him a pewter jug she was carrying, and beginning forthwith to pour into a cup.

He nodded carelessly and let her do as she pleased.

"Well, that is over," he said at last, in answer to his wife, bringing back his straying attention with an effort. "I have ordered my soldiers to bring my things here. If there is anyone who bothers you they will quickly enough settle the matter. My soldiers strictly obey."

She looked at him fixedly.

"But will you remain?"

He wrinkled his face in a pained manner at the abruptness of this question, and affected indifference.

"It is undecided as yet. Many affairs engage me. But I shall pay attention to your matter now. A soldier can be left here."

At this she demurred.

"A soldier—what good will he do? He will create trouble with the maid-servants, since it is always so. I wish to leave when you do."

He scratched the backs of his hands and loosened his tunic, talking erratically as if he were not taking her request too seriously.

"That will do no good unless you transform yourself into a male to travel with me—" He laughed loudly at his fancy. "One is usually only besieged by miserable circumstances when one has done wrong. You have done no

wrong. How can you come to a camp? Oh, no. That is no way to solve your difficulty."

He took a big gulp from the pewter pot of heated wine the old serving-woman had placed at his elbow. It pleased him so well that he filled the cup a second time, and emptied it with a swift toss.

"A camp is different from any place," he resumed. "Camps are not good places. The soldiers are rascals and much danger lurks for a woman. Oh, yes. Each day I flog a hundred and more of my men, and the sound of their cries floats over the fields. No mercy do I show. Unless you transform yourself into a male you could never travel with me." A flush had come into his face from the potent wine, and stayed there. His manner became more positive, more dictatorial. "Who bothers you here?—let me see and I will deal with them. Yes! These townspeople are unresisting when they see the soldiers. A whole battalion will I send into this street. When they see them they will tremble as do the eleven districts under my control, where none may move without my permission."

She listened, fascinated by his boastfulness. He was sitting cross-legged now, with his tunic open, his shoes off, his eyes half closed. Yet there was animation in his manner, and he opened and closed a fan he had picked up as if he felt the need for action.

"But near the camp is there no town—no place for me?" she inquired timidly.

He looked at her out of the corners of his eyes with an expression of guile. He looked at her as if she were a person who might steal from him his secret.

"There is a town near the camp—a great town," he said at last. "It is the provincial capital near which I have moved step by step. My capital it shall be. It is

even so. We will march on them and destroy them. I will give the orders." He uncrossed his legs, stood up with lightning rapidity, and shouted hoarsely soldiers' words of command which she did not understand but which transfixed her. "Forward we shall go in our thousands, thirty thousand men have I now. There will be panic and surrender. The town will be mine."

He sank back, as if exhausted by this unexpected outburst, and suddenly stared at her as if she were something strange.

"Will it be a son, you think? Have you consulted the fortune-tellers?" he said, in an interested way.

She nodded.

"A son it will be, they say; without a doubt a son. So care must be taken."

He agreed very heartily, shaking his head repeatedly as if this were a very wise remark.

"Certainly. Everything shall be done. Let me think. In ten days it will be clearer and a residence can be prepared in the provincial capital. If not in ten days, in fifteen; and if not in fifteen, in twenty. The residence will be fine with many courtyards, I guarantee you. But you must keep what I tell you secret, or never again might you see me. There are enemies to be thought of—ever so many—and I cannot expect mercy if they learn my plan. Those foreigners know, except the one-armed one, who is too talkative. The other two will tell no one. The day is not far off. But anxiety has begun to gain me. I am anxious about all manner of things. That is why I entered the city unexpectedly today, not really for consultation, but to discover as much as I could and to calm myself before the effort."

He became deeply depressed and stared fixedly at the

brick floor. This was the longest speech he had ever made to her, and she was impressed.

"Is there great danger?" she asked timidly.

"There is always danger—in front and behind. Who can be sure of his men these days? Yet I have given them success—why should they betray me?"

He was alarmed at his own words and now muttered something under his breath, as he beat the fan on the blackwood settee.

"Better not take any risk—better draw back before it is too late," she murmured.

He looked at her gloomily, with his head lowered like a bull about to charge.

"Me—draw back? Never. I am the one who has courage, who dares to go onward. Nothing am I afraid of. Nothing at all. Can I be disobedient to my Fate?" He tapped his chest to show what manner of man he was. "I shall take everything there is to take. I will tell you plainly. You will have the great Yamên to live in. Where would the little son play if there were no great courtyards for him!" He sat back and laughed. "You see, there are many affairs I cannot explain clearly, for being a woman you would not know their nature. It is important to know the nature of things. I am constantly reflecting and studying. Action is one thing, but without knowing the nature of things action is too often faulty."

This soliloquy passed over her head; excepting that he had a big design, which monopolized his thoughts, nothing was clear to her. Nevertheless here he was, beside her, in her power for the time being. So she sighed, and looked at him with her almond eyes.

"How dull it is for me—that is what I think. Here

must I sit waiting for my child, and you so busy with your affairs that you cannot think of me."

"No, no," he cried, rising and grasping her hands. "Untrue, totally untrue. Many times have I thought how could I arrange it differently. But you see each thing must have its right time, and those who forget what is important can never win success."

She bent her head as if she were weeping.

"Oh, oh," he continued in a rollicking sort of voice, looking down at her. "I have been thinking of something. As soon as the electric car comes we can do it." He patted her on the shoulder. "You require a little cheerfulness. Let us go and see an historical play. In the train I was talking with one who spoke of the merits of a new writer whose play all are going to see. Singing and acting are excellent." He looked up and called loudly, "Old woman, old woman, where are you? Tonight your mistress and I go to the theatre and you may go, too." He glanced at his watch. "Just time enough for us to eat and then we go. But my clothes must first be changed: military clothes are unsuitable. My soldiers will be here very soon now."

They went together in the big black car, a thing he himself had not dreamed of six months before, but which now he accepted casually enough as a matter of course, just as he accepted everything in the whole world. For her this was great; her black eyes glistened as the car rolled in a stately fashion through the lighted streets and the teeming people glanced up enviously at them.

"Comfortable, eh?" he exclaimed, with pride. "A matter of eight thousand dollars. Very necessary, although I prefer to ride a horse. But only a poor and unimportant person it is who does not ride in comfort."

"The cushions are soft. Never before have I ridden in one," she murmured, tugging at his sleeve.

In the theatre the best seats were purchased, and husband and wife sat together in a square Shakespearean box, divided from the others only by boards, with the orderly and the elderly maid-servant standing behind them.

The clashing scene on the stage did not engage the young woman's attention; for her the pageant was the crowds of people, and the vendors of sweetmeats, and the constant rustling and moving. The cymbals clashed and the drums rolled and the pipes sounded shrilly, and warriors came on the stage and went through their posturing, evoking applause whenever the lines were good not by hand-clapping but by hoarse, sudden shouts.

For him it was different. With a roughly printed slip in his hand, he studied the characters and fixed the historical period. These warriors were real to him, living, breathing realities. Their battles and complots were even as his battles and complots—united to him by an unbroken chain of similar events. He applauded as the others applauded, and his mind was refreshed.

"This play is excellent," he remarked, enjoying the proximity to the soft creature at his side, and satisfied with the way in which he had quieted her. "Both singing and acting are accomplished. Let us have sweetmeats. Then I go to seek the young writer."

Soon he strolled through the crowd, with his arms behind his back, preceded by his orderly who carried his card.

"Excellent, excellent," he said, when the young writer had been found. He stood exchanging complimentary remarks with him. "Such talent in writing should have greater outlet. Step to the side with me. Now, I will

speak frankly. I have need of a secretary, an urgent need in my camp where we use fellows who have been with troops for many years and have no talent at all. Yes, I need talent, and it will be richly rewarded. Will you come? Speak without hesitation."

They conversed in undertones for many minutes, settling what was to be done, the young writer accepting obsequiously a handful of banknotes, and pledging himself to start in a day or two.

General Wang came back to the square Shakespearean box well satisfied. The evening had been fruitful. He talked to his wife about many things, buying her so many little presents that they were surrounded by vendors, while she sat with her face wreathed in smiles.

They stayed until the very end, and then swept back through the mob, just as they had come, to the little house.

Daylight had scarcely come before he stirred. He was as silent as he could be, yet not silent enough. As he stood in the dim light, throwing on his tunic, adjusting his leather belt, while in the passage-way his orderly waited for him, holding his sword, and in the quiet street an engine purred, she awoke and sprang up with a suppressed cry.

"What is it?" she wailed.

"I am leaving for the camp by road," he answered firmly. "The one-armed foreigner meets me, and together we drive down the road. Yesterday was it all arranged."

"But you have told me nothing," she cried, with desperation.

He caught her by the shoulders.

"All will be well," he whispered, "make no outcry. In ten days it will be accomplished, if not in ten days in

fifteen, and if not in fifteen in twenty. You will come to me even as I have said, brought by my soldiers, and the great Yamên shall be yours. Make no outcry so that there be no shame for us both."

After he had left, she wept, swaying herself from side to side on the hardwood couch where he had spent the night with her, a blue silk coverlet hardly covering the smooth ivory of her naked limbs; while he, his face set in a frown, followed in his shiny black car the bright crimson one of the one-armed foreigner, who drove joyously down the long dusty road as if he were racing to a banquet.

XI

On the very day General Wang had announced that his daring coup was to be carried out, Mrs. Briller met with disaster. Going out quietly early in the morning after her wont to potter about in the curio-shops, her rickshaw was run into and upset by a careering pony. Mrs. Briller, thrown violently to the ground, lay helpless and groaned while no attempt was made to assist her.

"Doctor, doctor," she murmured, in the hope that someone in the crowd would understand her; but if anyone did they were careful not to show it, fearing that they might be compromised by that Eastern law which makes even a good Samaritan suspect.

Mrs. Briller, flat on her back, saw as in a dream the ever-growing sea of brown faces round her, in which the eyes were the only living things. In her agony it seemed to her that these eyes were threatening her—jealous with a hideous jealousy because she was stripping them of their most priceless possessions—vindictive eyes. She felt something she had never felt before. It was a horrible retribution which had overtaken her.

"Where's my runner?" she cried desperately, in English. "Come here," she repeated, again and again. But the runner was also lying on the ground a dozen yards away, where he had been hurled as from a catapult, and where he was determined to remain as proof that the sin was not his.

Mrs. Briller struggled to a sitting position. But as her legs gave her exquisite pain she could do no more.

"Help," she cried shrilly, "help!"

A policeman with a long staff, attracted to the scene, belaboured the crowd; and, finally, after an infinite time, a passing European doctor was secured. He made a rapid examination, and paid someone to bring an improvised stretcher and lay the injured woman on it.

"It's a compound fracture," he said without subterfuge. "At your age it will be a long business, I'm afraid."

Thereupon she was carried to a hospital with a gaudy green roof. Gladys, hastily summoned, was soon with her and wept a little at the grim adventure. Mrs. Briller, however, now that she had been picked up, displayed the heroic spirit and made light of the catastrophe. With both her legs in splints, she lay propped up in bed, not showing a trace of the pain she felt.

"It's too bad that I should miss such a lot at such an important time," she murmured, "but don't you worry about me, Gladys. Do you think the curio-dealers will be allowed to come here, and will you see that everything good is kept until I'm better?"

"Oh, don't worry about curios," sighed Gladys, feeling more and more upset. "Fancy this happening to you. It's too cruel." She kissed her aunt's pale face and felt that all the pleasure of life had departed. "Can't I help in some way?"

Mrs. Briller shook her head and closed her eyes. She was going to be like this for weeks and months; they had told her that at her age it was a matter of supreme difficulty for the bone to knit, and that the only hope was absolute quiet for an indefinite period. She would have to do something about Gladys—she could not possibly

leave her alone at a hotel. But what? Make her go away? She would never consent to that.

Then, as she had been given morphia, her thoughts became less concrete. She began to wonder whether this was not predestination, whether Gladys were not being left purposely alone so that she could work out her own destiny. Oh, but what would she do, with no one to give her advice; what would the Fates find in store for her?

She saw the ring of brown faces pressing close around her—those faces in which the eyes were the only living things. They were so countless, so all-pervading that there was intoxication in their numbers, in their very colourlessness, in their blue and grey clothing which hung so limply around them, as if they were inanimate objects—dolls.

She opened her eyes suddenly. Gladys was sitting clasping her hand, lost in thought.

"It's bad to be out here," she announced in her steady, precise voice. "Why did we stay so long, why did you allow it? It's been my fault, I know, just because I wanted to buy all those things. We've been here four months already. Now we shall have to stop for many months more, and I may never get back at all."

"Don't talk like that, Aunt Edith," cried the girl. "It's not your fault or anybody's fault. Things just happen. Just get well, and don't think about things."

The news of the mishap spread so quickly that very early in the day Enid appeared, bearing a great bundle of flowers.

"These miserable rickshaws! Why did you go in one?" she exclaimed. "I always knew they were most dangerous. What a horrible thing to happen! What are you

going to do with your niece? Can't she come and stay with us?"

She showed herself so sympathetic that when she had gone Mrs. Briller told Gladys that she was sure that this was the one subject on which Dr. Kettling was not to be trusted.

"Perfectly absurd he is, with his theories about the other husband. These things simply don't happen. He's hipped on the subject."

Gladys did not argue the point as she might have done had things been different. She felt overwhelmed, and her mind was in a whirl.

"Do you want me to take a room here so that I will be near you, Aunt Edith?" she asked.

"Certainly not. Fancy your having to live in a hospital because I'm here. No. You'll come every day for an hour or two and that's all, since you won't go and stay with anybody."

Gladys remained as long as she could, but the hour soon came when she had to leave.

There was a crowd in the hotel when she got back to it, and she could see that everyone was excited. Many condoled with her about her aunt, and their sympathy seemed so genuine that she was comforted.

"What's happened now in this land of surprises?" she asked. "You all seemed to be talking about something."

"Only that all the trains are stopped again. There's been a revolt in a provincial capital, and the railway has been cut to prevent the mutineers from seizing rolling-stock. It will all be over in twenty-four hours. It's the third time this year."

She passed on her way, little dreaming that the small, ugly man who had entertained her at dinner had set this

play in motion, and that this was a very important step in his sensational rise.

When she appeared next morning there was more news; an outline of what had happened was posted on the bulletin-boards, and people were standing about discussing the matter.

"Order has been restored by some general or other," they told her. "It's not so very far off from the spot where the bandit outrage took place."

In the evening she saw the Trents appear with a large party, and purposely she dawdled in the lobby. She knew Trent would not fail to come and speak to her; he had written her a little note the day before, and asked her to call upon him to do anything he could to make Mrs. Briller's penance less disagreeable.

When he caught sight of her he came up at once, and was so sympathetic that she began to feel that it was not so dreadful as it had seemed.

"Can it possibly take a year to get over a thing like that?" she asked him. "Haven't they been just trying to frighten me?"

He looked serious.

"It's slower than you think—particularly when the bone is broken through." Then, seeing that she looked despondent, he added: "I wouldn't think about it too much. There may be a miracle. Mrs. Briller may have so much vitality she'll put all the doctors wrong. I know a man here who had the same thing happen, and was up and about in two months."

He did not refer to what Enid had suggested at the hospital—that she should come and stay with them. Instead, he tried to interest her.

"You know quite a marvellous thing has happened—

your aunt will be interested. It's our General Wang who's captured the provincial capital and taken over a whole province; I knew something more or less of the sort was going to happen. And only ten years ago he was leading ponies and glad to earn a living that way."

"Is it really that small, ugly man?" she exclaimed, in wonder. "I heard the name but never thought of him. You know the wife never came to tea with us as she said she would do; she's never given a sign of life."

"She's very much alive," he assured her. "But their lives are so different; they're separated from us by so many things. I think it's as much an effort on their part to have dealings with us as it is for them to make a journey."

"What happens after you capture a provincial capital? What's the next move?" she inquired. "I want to interest my aunt."

Trent thought a minute.

"He'll have to hold the fort against all comers—to consolidate. He'll have to pay tribute to all sorts of people, to find allies, to lay out all the money that comes his way to the best advantage. He's so queer and so ambitious that the financial part doesn't mean much to him. He should be able to hold on for some time. Then a smarter man will probably throw him out, and he'll retreat into the back country again."

"Can it go on endlessly like that?" she asked wonderingly.

"Who's going to stop it? It's their country. It's perfectly natural and logical from their point of view."

"And finally, what?" she insisted.

"Why should there be anything final?" he inquired. "The kaleidoscope will just keep on turning, that's all.

Meanwhile, Shardun's in the seventh heaven. He sent me a marvellous wire today; he's pushed off by motor-car to greet the new Alexander, he telegraphed."

"Aunt Edith will be awfully interested," said Gladys. "I shall take her every newspaper I can find the first thing in the morning."

Mrs. Briller *was* interested. She had passed a good night, and the doctors had changed from pessimism to optimism.

"They say I'm a most remarkable woman, absolutely youthful in certain respects," she exclaimed. "They will let me move at the first possible moment. Now tell me all you know, Gladys, and buy me a map so that I can understand something about these names. Fancy our knowing the chief actor in all this business. It makes it so different."

She amused herself all day with newspapers. The human mass which had frightened her so on the morning of her accident had fallen into the background, and now she thought of it all philosophically.

"Perhaps it's all for the best; my accident, I mean. You see, I was overdoing it, and now I've got time to think. Tell Dr. Kettling he can come and see me tomorrow. I'll keep the others out for him if he'll promise to come. I want to talk to him, and that will leave you free tomorrow afternoon."

The next day the scholar arrived punctually at the hour set. He was as polite as ever, but somehow Mrs. Briller felt that he was a little restrained.

"What is it you've got on your mind, Dr. Kettling?" she said briskly. "I expected you to tell me all sorts of things, but instead of that I'm doing most of the talking."

He assured her that it was a delusion on her part—he had nothing at all on his mind except concern at her condition.

She shook her head.

"You're as transparent as a pane of glass. You've got something to say, but you don't know how to begin."

"My life is so uneventful, so unimportant to others," he murmured. "I am one stage removed from the vegetable kingdom. I assure you nothing is wrong."

Mrs. Briller remained unconvinced.

"Dr. Kettling, you must confess yourself. What is the great sorrow? Unburden yourself."

In spite of himself, he smiled.

"It's nothing, nothing at all. Just a little pain here—" He pointed to his heart.

"You've not fallen in love?"

He made a wry face.

"I'm beyond the age."

"You haven't received a disturbing letter?"

"No."

"Our friend Trent hasn't been nasty to you?"

Kettling heaved a sigh.

"No—he is never that. But he recently told me something disturbing. Mrs. Trent has conceived the idea that I have talked too much about her past—that I have been highly indiscreet, in fact."

He turned his eyes sorrowfully on Mrs. Briller.

"Have you been indiscreet?" she asked. "Have you gone too far with your theories?"

"I dare say, I dare say. But not far enough to justify what Mrs. Trent declares I have said."

He looked at her in a way which made her exclaim:

"Do you mean me?"

He inclined his head.

"Well, well. What a funny thing to happen! I mentioned your theories to several people, but only in a very general way. Dear, dear, what a town to live in!"

She became thoughtful as she remembered that she had said that this was the one subject about which he was hipped. She began to believe that there might be something in his point of view—something to which she had paid insufficient attention.

She must follow this more closely and not take the wrong point of view.

XII

A WEEK later a letter of voluminous proportions in the native script, packed into a great envelope, with a broad red strip running down the centre, as convention demands, reached Trent, who confided it to Kettling for translation.

"Seems to be an interesting document," declared the latter, as he skimmed it over. "But you must give me at least a day to pencil out an exact transcription. It's a curious fact that even after twenty years it's easier for me to read a book in German, which I've almost forgotten, than the simplest communication in this language. This was compiled by someone who knows how to write, too, which means that there is a purpose behind it."

"A purpose?"

"Of course," mumbled the scholar, turning over the thin sheets and continuing to read. "They never take the trouble to do a single thing without a purpose. It may be hard to understand what it is at first, but it always stands out in the course of time. We're their punching-bag; they try out their ideas on us—we're also their guides, philosophers and friends when we least suspect it —there's no end to the infinite variety of ways they exploit us."

The next day, when he brought back the translation, he was in a different mood. His indignation boiled over in hot words.

"This has been a most disgraceful business—unparal-

leled even under the Republic. Read what he says—I had no idea yesterday: it took me half the night to translate—six mortal hours."

He dropped into a chair and stared mournfully at the ceiling.

"As bad as that?" rejoined Trent. "I've got a soft spot for the little rascal—I can't be so severe as you."

He settled himself and became absorbed in the closely written foolscap sheets.

DISTINGUISHED ELDER BROTHER:

Being unable personally to report to you the course of events since I last consulted you in your home, I avail myself of the departure of my servant to send you by hand some account of the terrible rising in the provincial capital which has been so happily suppressed. My troops are now in full control of the city; all the policing and tax-collecting has been taken over by our army; complete quiet reigns. Burial of the corpses will be completed in a few days; and although many streets have been obliterated by fire, hope exists that by next harvest commerce will revive and the heart of the people be comforted.

Know well that the late governor (who was killed during the fighting) was a great rascal. During the time of the train outrage of some months ago, to which I cannot refer without a feeling of shame since your Honour suffered captivity, this man had secret connection with the bandits. Indeed, it is now well known that of all the bands in our province not one but was under some obligation to him. That he schemed against the previous governor, who was likewise rascally, by the method of embroiling him with foreign nations by capturing their nationals so that official wrath might fall on his predecessor's head and his dismissal follow, is now well known. It is common talk indeed that the outrage was the sole work of this man who has now perished, his heartlessness causing him to allow even foreign ladies to be carried into captivity. He is the one your Honour may have heard called the Frog, who in the seventh year of the

Republic was involved in a Restoration plot and sentenced to be decapitated, but unfortunately escaped.

Having succeeded to the post of governor by this indecent method, and being wholly heartless and ignorant of military affairs, the deceased practised extortion night and day and was estranged even from his bodyguard troops. Reports had constantly reached me during past months that the situation was critical in the extreme; and being cognizant of the peril both from within and without, I cautiously from time to time advanced my troops from the southern districts to the central ones, on one excuse or the other, so that in case of necessity corrective action could come.

Suddenly in the night of the fifteenth of this month the worst news reached me. The troops in the capital had risen and were firing on the townspeople to intimidate and extort from them. Great and terrible confusion prevailed. The late governor had taken refuge in his Yamên and surrounded himself with the police troops, whom he had caused to be specially armed with machine-rifles. Fighting was occurring between these two forces and terrifying the inhabitants. Many messages begged me to march in my men and rescue all from an infernal fate without the slightest delay. Being of a compassionate nature, and bearing in my mind my duty to the Government, I at last consented.

The disposition of my troops had been so thoughtfully planned, prior to this event, that without any delay at all they advanced simultaneously from four quarters on the afternoon of the sixteenth. Before night had fallen the railway-station was in my hands, and that is where I fixed my headquarters, understanding well the importance of communications. At daybreak on the seventeenth we advanced through every gate, many mutineers surrendering when they saw my flags, and begging to be enlisted in my forces.

As your Honour knows, the city inside the walls is very vast and straggling, the suburbs near the station having alone benefited from modernization. The medley of streets is made worse by the river which flows through the town from east to west, dividing it into two unequal parts and hampering communication. There are also a series of little

lakes, and some marshes. Taking advantage of these difficulties, all the rascals in the town, during the interval before my troops were able to obtain control, worked their will on the inhabitants. Many of the bandit bands have their headquarters here, together with their secret hoards of arms and ammunition; and although few were actually present during the uprising, the city rapscallions joined hands with such as were there, together with many soldiers who had removed their uniforms, acting most brutally.

In such circumstances it was necessary to adopt extreme measures. I proclaimed the law of no quarter; all caught with arms or valuables were to be killed without mercy. Fighting became serious, artillery being used in many cases to destroy buildings full of looters. Frightful disorder continued to reign even after the bulk of my army had entered, a sort of madness possessing all. In all my experience never have I witnessed such scenes. Firing raged far and wide, and the number who were accidentally killed by bullets coming from distant points was very great.

The death of the military governor occurred in this wise. Although I repeatedly attempted to communicate with him, he was maddened by fear, and a ceaseless fire was poured by his orders from the roofs of his Yamên on all alike. My men, who were mixed with the many mutineers, suffered severely and became confused. By bugle and otherwise I attempted to reassure him. But having a black heart he acted insolently, continuing to fire on all alike. Fearing that worse might happen unless I acted with decision, it became necessary to take strenuous measures against him. Eighteen of Shardun's guns, never before used, were brought forward; and to save greater disaster, the gates of the Yamên were destroyed by their fire, together with the outer line of buildings. I was able personally to observe the work of these guns; what they did was highly satisfactory, the rapidity with which they could be discharged crushing resistance, and the burst of the shells being very terrifying.

At this stage great confusion prevailed. My men, who had been without sleep or food for two days, were exceedingly angered, and the artillery corps fired without ceasing.

How the late governor met his death is not yet clear. Some say that the police troops, fearing that they had been led into a trap and would be murdered for their heavy firing, killed him with bayonet thrusts before they surrendered at nightfall; others maintain that Shardun's shells, overshooting the mark, had perhaps torn down a building from which timber and stone were dislodged on top of him. The late governor's corpse was found late on the third day, with many signs of a violent death marked on it. Yet there are none who will maintain with certainty how it came to pass. I caused the corpse to be placed in a coffin of finest wood which in due course will be returned to his home; and thus the dignity of his high office will be maintained. Immediately after his death the storm died down as suddenly as it had arisen; and hope slowly emerged as daylight comes after a gloomy night.

Such is the story of how this event came to pass. Knowing your friendship with many, this account hastily penned by my secretary may be allowed to reach those who have to do with Government affairs, either in representing their countries in our poor Capital, or in forwarding such accounts to foreign lands.

I reserve for your own ear a few words regarding our discoveries of the deceased governor's wealth.

While the official vaults were empty except for many cases of worthless copper coins, among his private effects, packed ready for removal, were such great stores of foreign banknotes that they filled nine trunks. This money, the proceeds of his nefarious work over a long term of years, makes more easy the many problems left behind him. Anxious that all should benefit alike from my success, I have issued a proclamation declaring that all arrears due the soldiery and the officials will be promptly paid, which has occasioned great joy. Even after this has been duly carried out, a not inconsiderable sum will remain.

I am exceedingly busy with the work of reconstruction with which the Government has now entrusted me. Although my talent is quite unequal to such a severe task, and my heart is full of fear, I must persist, trusting that the assist-

ance of my friends will serve to hide my own insignificance and that soon another more capable will be found to take my place. I await your encouragement and must benefit from your advice. I am transferring my family here together with several relatives, so that with a single heart I can attend to the affairs of the people, and that they may henceforth see how I am identified with them. Shardun has been with me recently. We have constant consultations regarding reorganizing the artillery which he finds faulty and insufficiently powerful. Many new plans are being formed to repair what was defective in the old, and to insure peace and good government in the new. I cannot thank you enough for having found me such a man of energy to hide my incompetence.

YOUR HUMBLE SERVANT.

Trent put down this astonishing narrative and looked at Kettling.

"A most remarkable letter, and that's an interesting bit about the Frog," he commented. "But as for the purpose I'm not sure."

Kettling sprang to his feet and waved his long thin arms excitedly.

"I know! Can't you see? This wipes out his conversation with us—cancels it. This shows how he had nothing to do with preparing it all. This identifies you with anything that may have happened because you found Shardun for him. You're an accessory—you see?"

Trent stared at him.

"But it's a tissue of fabrications. What have I to do with it all?"

"I'm explaining—not accusing," said Kettling. "I'm getting inside his brain. His whole design is to establish himself on a clean and honourable basis even with his friends who know that it was his own plot, and make them

understand why they must remain silent and continue to assist him. Of course, he caused the previous governor to be brutally murdered. Do you remember an engineer called Dumont? Yesterday, I met him by chance. He says the man was strangled after being held prisoner for several days. Yet this account, I guarantee you, will appear in every paper in the land—with Shardun's assistance and the money part carefully omitted. You are specially favoured. You have been given an advance copy. No one will know the truth except his inner circle—and us. Dumont says there were fourteen thousand people killed—and fourteen thousand coffins ordered. He's arrived—he's surmounted every barrier, he's in a controlling position. He's indifferent. Who will dare to touch a man with thirty thousand men—possibly fifty thousand? The only thing he's not absolutely sure about is us foreigners. Our interests seem to all of them a vast spider's web which they must take care of for fear that they will become fatally entangled. So he's commenced taking precautions; his Press Bureau has commenced to work. He's got a plum in his hand—and he's going to keep it."

"I wish Shardun would come along—I think I'll wire him," remarked Trent, a little uneasily now.

"Shardun?" said Kettling, rubbing his bony hands. "I look upon Shardun as the turning-point. Without Shardun, without his explosives and his trench-mortars, and the moral support, he wouldn't have dared to tackle this."

"Come, come," protested Trent, because his uneasiness had increased. "You can't pretend that we're responsible."

Kettling did not listen to him; he was going on with his analysis.

"I've watched how their minds work. An amazing, incredible process, unlike anything else in the world. Some day I shall write about it and everyone will buy my book. This was forming in his head when he talked to us that day he unexpectedly arrived; he was making up his mind when he was pretending he was so upset about the factory. They need something external to their own world—to rest upon; then they take off just as a man leaps from a spring-board. How often have I seen it! Fourteen thousand corpses! If this is allowed to pass, everything will be possible; we may be murdered in our beds. That man ought to be hanged."

"They don't hang them here," said Trent drily. "What's the use of exciting yourself? I shall telegraph for Shardun."

"Sedition and murder in the city," said Kettling, a little enigmatically. "You remember that it was Barabbas who was the hero—always Barabbas."

Then the two men sat silent, for they had both heard someone outside.

Enid, who rarely came to this pavilion, had put her head through the doorway.

"Hullo, what's up?" she remarked. "I could hear you at the other end of the compound. Is there any news?"

"Yes," said Trent, "rather exciting, too. It's about our own General Wang's latest exploit—the capture of the provincial capital. We've just had a letter."

Now she had come in, and stood as if undecided.

"I never discuss Chinese politics, not understanding a word about them," she remarked, as if her views had been asked. "But why should he want to tell you about it? I thought they generally kept these things pretty dark and disliked saying anything."

"That was what we were arguing about," said Trent. "It's been a regular massacre. Fourteen thousand killed. Don't you want to read about it?"

She nodded, and negligently picked up the closely written sheets and commenced reading.

Kettling watched her white hands as they turned over his paper. He saw from her expression that the flowing narrative deeply interested her. Oh, she was intelligent—there was no question about that. What had she come here for? Had she really heard them, or did she merely want to interrupt? In all his experience he never recollected her taking the trouble to walk across the garden to see her husband—it was always a servant who came with a message. He was sure she just wanted to interrupt.

She had got to the end. She put down the writing with a characteristic remark.

"Shardun will make a good thing out of it if no one else does. The ugly little man forgets to mention how much money there was in those nine trunks. That seems to me a deliberate omission. And I don't see anything about the fourteen thousand corpses."

There she was—going straight to the point, not caring anything about the matter save for the bare facts. Kettling wanted to tell her brutally that the engineer Dumont had told him personally about the fourteen thousand killed; but he refrained, as that name might reopen their quarrel, since Dumont had played a certain rôle in precipitating Scott's suicide.

"Perhaps the account throws in a bit too much melodrama," she now added, throwing a glance at Kettling almost as if she could read his thoughts. "I'm told that even a literal translation doesn't give the exact sense of

difficult or obscure passages. You have to leave a margin for their use of the poetical method."

Kettling felt hurt at the slur cast on his scholarship, and rejoined very stiffly:

"I venture to disagree. I've been translating for twenty years. I guarantee the accuracy of what I have written. A horrible crime has been committed on a defenceless population, but unfortunately it will never be avenged. The point I had been making is that the thing was morally decided upon here that day that General Wang arrived so unexpectedly. We were accessories before the act—morally, I mean."

There they were—at daggers drawn again!

"I don't exactly know what you mean," she replied coldly. "If you are including my husband, I must dissent. I'm sure that he had nothing to do with the matter, even in the remotest degree."

"You're too literal, Enid," said Trent, very calmly. "Kettling and I were only arguing the point, and this is one of his conclusions. Do you want to see me about anything in particular?"

She nodded.

"Private?"

"More or less."

Kettling turned and took up his hat.

"I'll be getting off. If you will let me take that paper, I'll have copies made. I would like to keep a copy myself."

But when he was gone she sat silent; and so did Trent, for he was never a talkative man.

At length she said:

"I've found out. There're houses for the summer to throw to the birds all along the coast. So many people

have gone away. Now how about this one? We'll have to send our own furniture."

She showed him a plan and remained talking for some time. But Trent was not thinking much of what she was saying; he answered her in an absent-minded way. He was wondering about a stray expression of Kettling's, that they were all in a spider's web.

A spider's web? A funny expression to use.

"What's the matter?" she remarked, noticing his mood. "Is there anything really in what Kettling said?"

He shook his head and went across to his desk.

"It's a question of the point of view—that's all. Kettling's a bit frightened, I believe. But in spite of that, he has an uncanny way of getting into their minds."

She was stirred. She looked at him with curiosity, and went finally from the room deep in thought, as though this were an aspect which required more attention than she had given to it, being impressed by Kettling's analyzing powers just as Mrs. Briller had been, although about a very different matter.

XIII

A DAY or two later Shardun rushed into the web in his crimson motor-car at such a pace that it seemed as if he would tear everything to pieces.

"Where's that man Kettling?" was the first thing he said to Trent. "Get him in a hurry, if you can. It's very important, and I've got a big package for Miss Cunningham. Tea-pots. She wanted a certain kind that has a double clay bottom. I got your telegram, but didn't answer as there wasn't time."

At luncheon he entertained Trent and his wife to an amazing account of what had happened.

"Hope these ducks don't know enough of our lingo to get my meaning," he remarked, glancing at the servants. "I'll cover it up in hideous slang as well as I can. Perfectly amazing little man, our general. Delivers the goods every trip. He cleaned up that town, believe me. What he left anyone could have, as far as he was concerned. After he landed those nine trunks he lost interest in small things. Do you know how much a trunk can hold in banknotes—one of those full-size, native pigskin affairs? A bit more than seven hundred thousand in fives and tens. Multiply that by nine and you get his total clean-up. It was just under six and a half million dollars. What did he do, gloat over it all? No. Started calculating how much he could profitably spend out of it. Paid up everybody, including his own men—that took two millions. Banked three millions as reserve. Sent a million up here

and purchased his appointment as military governor. Got back the despatch under the president's seal in less than twenty-four hours—quickest thing you ever saw. Don't tell me they can't hustle when the almighty dollar is floating around. Some speed, believe me, everybody developed; they just waltzed through things. And as for little me, he honoured his promise to the letter—I got my hundred and fifty thousand as patent rights on the mortars, and counted them out myself. Took me six hours to do it with my one hand, and I developed writer's cramp into the bargain. Ever tried to count those greasy packages? I wouldn't be cashier in a bank for something."

He laughed loudly.

"Was it as bad as they made out—I mean the taking of the city?" asked Trent.

Shardun's expression changed.

"It was a pretty nasty mess even when I arrived, and a certain amount of cleaning-up had already been done. I've seen blood splashed around before, but everything previous was a joke compared with the number of dead bodies around. They must have machine-gunned them in thousands—everybody mixed up all together, legs, arms, bodies; not pretty, certainly. But he had to pull it off quick and put the fear of God into everybody, including his own men. And, believe me, he did. Why, now you could spread silver dollars on the road and not a cat would go near. That's the stuff they understand." He heaved a sigh. "This is the first civilized food I've had for days. Been living on hard-tack—when I could manage to get out of eating their feasts, which have been going on ever since the guns stopped firing."

Enid was amused by all this talk.

"What are you doing this evening—any grand new con-

spiracy? If there isn't, how about a little poker to see if we can't take some of your ill-gotten wealth?"

"I'm game," laughed Shardun, "that is, if I can get through. I'm loaded down with things, however. I've got to see every kind of person and at daybreak I'm off again." He looked at his watch. "I hope Kettling's coming along soon—that's where I start from?"

"What do you want him for?" she inquired, almost sharply.

Shardun cast her a swift look.

"Down on him? Mighty useful man all the same. If I knew the language the way he does I'd be emperor of this country——"

She gave a sudden exclamation.

"I'm sure I know," she commented.

"Well, don't let old Trent know if you do," said Shardun. "I want to spring this on Kettling and nail him before he's time to think. There he is, going down to the library. If you'll excuse me I'll rush after him."

He swung himself out of his chair and out of the house in his rapid, impulsive way.

"Kettling, Kettling, here I am," he called, stopping the tall, thin scholar before he had reached the door of the library. "I've been simply thirsting to see you. Are we quite private in here—no bally eavesdroppers with their ears glued to the keyholes? Well, the fact is I need you —I need you so badly I can't get on without you. Let's sit down and talk this out."

He dropped into a chair and lit a formidable cheroot.

"You need me!" echoed Kettling in surprise. Then he added, almost bitterly, "You're the only person in the world that does—if I except Trent."

Shardun bit into his cheroot.

"Come, come, that's a bit rough on yourself, isn't it? Been any trouble? Enid seemed a bit tart just now. But forget the women—they all get like that at times. Lots of people in the world probably need you, and I need you worse than all the others put together."

"That's extraordinary," murmured the scholar, mollified in spite of himself. "What can it possibly be?"

"I'm coming to that as fast as I can. You remember that little interpreter I had?—Micky I called him. Proper little blighter—squeezed like the worst of them, and was always putting his nose into my papers. I've sacked him, and I can't get anyone satisfactory, although there's a whole mob of them in the factory office. Now it's absolutely imperative for me to have someone first class to handle the native end of it, particularly the documents and contracts. We're running up two new places—machine-gun ammunition and bombs. I simply must have the right man. I want you."

"Me!" echoed Kettling, stupefied. "But I've never seen a factory in my life."

"Damn all factories!" said Shardun. "You never need put your nose near one. Documents is your end of the business. We've got ten a day sometimes. I want you—must have you. Look here. I'll give you ten pounds a day and everything found. That's a cabinet minister's pay with the income-tax off."

"No, no, it's quite impossible," muttered Kettling confusedly.

"Ten pounds a day. A hundred dollars in this currency—three thousand a month, thirty-six thousand a year," said Shardun.

"Thirty-six thousand dollars a year!" exclaimed Kettling, as if the heavens were about to fall.

"Yes—and I'll pay you half a year down in advance if you sign on for a year. This is no casual show; this is big business; and I'm in the front rank with any number of aces up my sleeve. Say the word and I'll hand you over eighteen thousand bucks as fast as I can sign a cheque. That will keep you going for a bit."

Kettling had gone white from emotion.

"Keep me going for a bit—it's my expenditure over six years. But I can't accept. I'm sorry—very sorry. But it's impossible. I couldn't do it. I'm only a student—a man of books."

Shardun jumped up in his amazement.

"You're refusing? Man alive, you can't refuse. It's madness. I've got to have you. You must have a price. Name it, and I'll pay it. You don't mean to tell me you haven't got a price?" He stared at him, his twinkling blue eyes gazing in a concentrated way as if his life depended on the answer.

Kettling looked crushed, and talked to the ground.

"I'm *hors de concours*—an exhibit of no value at all, just an old book-worm, useful for teaching odd ideas, with an odd knowledge of things Asiatic. But machine-guns—bombs—what have I to do with them? I hate them, I despise them. I think it bestial that this people should be pulverized by this brutal phase of our civilization."

His eyes flashed behind his glasses, and his hands were clenched.

Shardun was unmoved—and undefeated.

"Quite so—I get your meaning completely. I sympathize with your prejudices about them blowing one another up. But I'm introducing something worth-while to you—a full dinner-pail, as my Mr. Yank at the works says. That's the only thing you have to worry about.

You can cash in on this as long as you like, and send me to hell when you've had as much as you can stand. Help me to kick through——"

Kettling shook his head gloomily.

"No—impossible. You tempt me sorely, but I will die sooner than surrender."

"What's your objection?"

"I've told you—I couldn't go down among those hideous, death-dealing things."

"Ah, now I see a bit clearer. Don't want to move, don't want to move from your broken-down old temple. In fact, you love the place so much you couldn't be separated."

"Perhaps—perhaps it's that."

"Let me think," said Shardun, biting through his cheroot with his powerful jaws and hurling the broken pieces away. He began pacing up and down the room, with his mutilated arm in front of him and his whole arm behind his back in a peculiar mannerism. Then he commenced muttering, thinking aloud—in a characteristic way: "Damned annoying! I'll have to start a motor-bike service for you. Could be done, of course. At forty miles an hour I could get replies in six hours; if you put speed on your end. I'm willing to try it out. Look here, if you're not on the premises I can't pay you for a full-time job. Nothing like that. But I'll take you on as a part-timer. It will help you a whole lot—make some of 'em who drop sharp remarks sit up. Do you accept?"

Kettling looked utterly bewildered. It seemed to him that the end of the world had come. Make some of those who dropped sharp remarks sit up? The man was not without subtlety. He was tempting him from a new angle —and letting him stay by his own fireside. He thought

of Enid and her gossip, and a wave of exultation passed over him.

"Exactly what does that mean? Have I committed myself?" he asked, in his simple way.

"You have," shouted Shardun, his blue eyes dancing with amusement. "You've swallowed the line and the gaff and the whole blooming works. I'm saving money, too. I've got to debit you with the motor-cycles, and the riders and all their oil and petrol and repairs. I'll start with two Russians, any number of Koltchak's men still hanging around looking for cheap jobs. I'll get two young men who will ride to hell and back if their pay comes in regularly; and it will. Look here—here's my offer, a hundred pounds a month. You've got to be available all the time—Sundays, feast days, night and day. You've got to be my slave until I release you. When the stuff is too long to handle quickly, a *précis* has got to be brought back by the same man the same day. That's my offer. You must sign for at least a year; yes or no?"

Shardun pointed his immense hand at him accusingly.

"Yes—I think it's yes. I'll try," stammered Kettling. "I don't know if a probationary period might not be more advisable—" He stopped, trying to think what this would mean to him.

Shardun interrupted him, drawing out a huge leather pocket-book.

"No time for probationary periods in my world—you either kick through or you miss. Look here, make out a receipt." He began counting out fifty-dollar notes. "Here's three months. I'll send the contract for signature with the first papers." He pushed the money over to Kettling, and lighted a fresh cheroot.

The scholar was gazing at the money as if it might explode.

"I feel like a robber, a buccaneer," he murmured. "An ordinary receipt is it that you require?" He picked up a pen, and in his neat, precise writing filled in the necessary words.

Shardun ran his eye over it, nodded and thrust it into his pocket.

"I'm glad that's settled. I go back tomorrow morning. I'll send a man by train in the evening with the first documents—can't get the motor-bikes and the men by whistling for them. Make everything simple for me—no high-brow stuff or involved meanings. I want everything so clear that I can catch them out when they try and double-cross me, which happens three times a day. Now I'm off."

He went down the steps of the pavilion in a leap to Trent who was standing waiting for him.

"Some job," he exclaimed. "He was so sticky I didn't think I'd break through."

"What have you been doing?" exclaimed Trent.

Shardun burst into a laugh, and glanced over his shoulder.

"I've got him signed on. Paid him so he can't back out. That's worth a mint of money to me. Poor old Kettling! Fell for a thousand bucks a month, so long as I leave him in his broken-down old temple."

"What?" replied Trent, thinking this too amazing to be true. "You've pulled him in, too? What do you expect him to do—blow up the palaces!"

Shardun grinned.

"No—the old duck would forget to light the fuses—or would remain watching to make sure, and touch himself off. . . . He's on documents—seeing that Captain

Shardun doesn't get the short end each time. And he'll do it all right. The combination is good."

"Shardun, Shardun, you ought to be jailed," exclaimed Trent, as they walked back. "What do you think he's gone and done?" he asked Enid. "He's made Kettling a fellow-conspirator—bought him for his ammunition factory."

"Mighty good buy, too," agreed Shardun, watching Enid's face. "Gives him a bit of money and shows him how the world moves."

"Are you going to see that those tea-pots are delivered to Miss Cunningham?" said Enid, so deliberately that somehow she showed him her great displeasure.

XIV

KETTLING, very busy now that he was at the beck and call of a man of volcanic energy, had acquired a way of paying flying visits to Mrs. Briller which greatly amused her.

"Ten minutes one way or the other can't make any difference," she was always protesting. "You've become as bad as a newspaper reporter."

"I want to establish a good record," he replied. "So far I have almost eliminated the factor of space. I finish off everything as fast as it arrives. Shardun says he's highly contented. I want to learn how to be a business man."

One afternoon he seemed less anxious to rush off than usual. He dallied, looked at his watch, sighed.

Mrs. Briller exchanged glances with Gladys.

"I'm not in a hurry today," he remarked regretfully, at last.

"And why, pray?" inquired Mrs. Briller.

He sighed deeply.

"Shardun's sent nothing for three days. One of his Russian despatch-riders came through this morning to say that he had gone off suddenly, leaving no orders. I can't understand it at all. What does it mean? Everything is at a standstill until he returns."

"Has he never done anything like that before?" said Gladys.

"Never—he's been regularity itself. I have really noth-

ing to do—I feel lost without this work. I feel I am not earning my pay."

"What nonsense," said Mrs. Briller. "You've been working seven days a week. You're entitled to a holiday."

"I'm uneasy," he replied, "very uneasy. Something has happened. One becomes highly suspicious in this country. A break of any kind always has significance. It means that something has transpired. Queer things are always happening. It may be days and days before I have an inkling."

Yet that very evening Shardun appeared at his little temple, just as the scholar was sitting down to eat. Shardun was dressed in the uniform of a Chinese general, which gave him a curiously majestic aspect, as if he belonged to some new pantheon and had suddenly come among mortals to get a taste of the earth.

"Sorry to break in on you like this," he exclaimed, "but I give you ten minutes—no, twenty minutes, and I'll have a snooze. Then we've got to hurry round to Trent's to catch him before he gets out. I want advice. Don't mind me. I was up all last night and caught the eight A.M. train which was three hours late."

He dropped into an old arm-chair and was almost instantly quietly snoring.

Kettling, seated at his ascetic supper, which consisted of a bowl of soup, a pot of tea and some rice and vegetables, regarded him thoughtfully. There was immense relief in his heart that this giant among men had not disappeared for good, dropped through a hole into some subterranean pit as he had fantastically imagined was always possible. Here he was in the flesh, as vital as ever, as volcanic. His immense bulk, the girth of his chest (which

he boasted measured fifty-six inches) his stupendous legs, seemed to change the aspect of the room. It was not large enough to accommodate so much potential energy; the style of the furniture and the delicate arabesque of the windows were overpowered. As he slumbered his face acquired an anxious look; Kettling lost himself in conjectures—and the twenty minutes lengthened into half an hour.

But an unseen sentinel watched in Shardun's brain. Suddenly he stirred, rubbed his forehead and stood up—all seemingly in one motion.

"Come along," he remarked, casually enough.

He walked fast and talked little until he was inside Trent's great gateway. Then he said emphatically:

"What I want are practical suggestions, not philosophical interpretations. This thing has got to be dealt with quickly or not at all. Our man's in so deep we can't afford to waste time. Now I wonder if we've caught our bird here."

Not only was Trent in, but there were a host of people in the house, judging by the noise. Shardun, standing doubtfully in the hall, muttered to Kettling: "I'm not going to face the crowd in this kit. Had no time to change at all. I've got to wear these clothes when I'm on the job with the little general to get away with it. It's up to you."

"I'll see what I can do," said Kettling.

He sent in a message by a servant. The man, misunderstanding him, carried it to Enid, who promptly came out and rushed up to Shardun, ignoring him totally.

"Whatever are you dressed like that for? Why so mysterious? Come on in," she exclaimed.

"Can't be done," he rejoined, patting her hand in a pa-

ternal way. "I assure you, it can't. I want Trent—badly. Send him out. We'll go in this little room and wait."

He tiptoed in his stiff brown riding-boots, followed by Kettling, into an ante-room divided off from the rest of the building by gold-paper doors. Trent presently came in, and looked at Shardun with a smile.

"Have you taken command? What's the brilliant move this time?"

"Wait till you hear all about it and you won't be so cheery," rejoined Shardun, wrinkling his forehead. "There's hell to pay, and if someone can't think of a solution the bottom's out of my market. I've got to talk an awful lot, so prepare for a long yarn. Now this is how it commenced. Sit down, and don't interrupt, anybody. I got my first inkling about a fortnight ago, when the indents stopped coming in and I couldn't get answers to anything I sent. Then a story spread among my men—you know the way they get things out of the air—that some damned bad joss had appeared for the little general. I couldn't make head or tail of it. Sent a man up who knows some English to see, and he came back in twenty-four hours with a wild tale that the devils had got into the provincial capital and that everything was at a standstill. Ever heard anything as crazy as that? That made my men so uncomfortable that the work suffered—they figured that it wouldn't be long before the same visitation hit them. I stood it as long as I could, and then determined to go and see for myself. Put on this uniform as a general in his blooming army, took my revolvers and three days' supplies. But would you believe it, even that one-eyed sinner, Nelson, who drives my car when I let him, wouldn't go, so I went by train.

"Well, everything seemed calm enough at the station.

Even inside the city I couldn't see a thing different from what it was when I left. Oh, yes, one thing. They'd not only doubled the sentries but the police as well. Even the men on point duty were in pairs, and they all squinted at me so suspiciously that it gave one the jimjams. I got to the Yamên and walked right in on our little man, who pretended to be mighty surprised and not at all pleased to see me. Business is business, I told him; I'd come to find out why I couldn't get answers to anything, and why his army didn't want any more ammunition. Was he quitting, and if so what did he want me to do with the plant? He only grunted at first; but after I had jollied him a bit the truth began to leak out through one of the interpreters. He said there was panic in the town—and a panic in the army. Every night shoals of little black devils appeared, about two feet high, who plucked at everybody's clothes. There were thousands of them. The Yamên was the worst of all. The deceased governor's spirit was so constantly about, and the curtains in every room flapped so as he passed, that the women and children refused to remain—even our general's wife had cleared out. The tale was absolutely circumstantial—from their point of view. Fourteen thousand men had been killed here, and although fourteen thousand coffins had been ordered, it appears that the money had been stolen, the coffins never delivered, and the corpses dumped anywhere. Now the fourteen thousand were clamouring for proper burial, and the little black devils were their spirits, plucking at everybody's sleeve to call attention to their case. As for the governor's ghost, the governor had died too young, and so he was determined to come back and take a hand in the game. The interpreter repeated that four times as if he thoroughly agreed. Died too young—a neat

way of putting it! Of course, you've heard the yarn how he was strangled after they had kept him three days in a room, and wheedled out of him where the boodle in the nine trunks was.

"Well, I tried to reason with them after we'd sat through a long ceremonial meal. I told them that these things simply didn't happen—it was all moonshine. General Wang broke into laughter at that; said that my education hadn't commenced as far as their country was concerned, and that he had proofs—proofs was the word he used—which you two knew about that many years ago the same sort of thing had happened in this very house. In any case everybody had seen the small black devils; it wasn't a matter of one or two people, but of everyone. The army had them in the camps worse than anyone else, in spite of their watch-fires and their sentries; and the army was scared.

"After they had talked themselves out, I started in on the Yamên ghost. The little general didn't like that a bit, but I was determined to go on with it. I wanted to know where the worst part of the building was. Everywhere, they said. I stuck to it, however, and presently it began to come out; it was particularly in a back pavilion where he had been confined and killed. I told them that I was not going to see all our plans going to hades because of one man who claimed he had died too young. I would investigate according to Western methods.

"Then they wanted to know what I proposed to do. I wouldn't tell them. I spent the afternoon inspecting. I got half a dozen electric torches from a Japanese shop, and then I told them that I took over responsibility for the former governor's quarters—that nobody was to come near as I would probably fire repeatedly, and I didn't want

to produce a fresh crop of little black fellows by hitting the wrong men!

"At nine o'clock I settled for the night just as I stood. I didn't take off a thing, except these boots which creak a bit. I had my electric torches, three bottles of beer, and two Webleys with fifty rounds.

"They'd given me a native string bed which I dragged into the middle of the room so that I'd have an all-round view; but for an hour or two I didn't go near it. I spent the time prowling around in my socks, inside and outside, flashing a torch from time to time to see if I could spot anything, and sitting down in all sorts of queer spots on the off chance that I might pick up a clue.

"At about eleven o'clock I got my first shock. I had gone into a back room, feeling my way in the dark, when I landed up against something hard like a table or chest. I didn't want to turn a light on, so I decided to sit there for a bit. I don't know why, but presently something made me feel a bit uncanny. Before I realized what I was doing I had flashed my torch and looked around. I was sitting on one of their enormous wooden coffins—no other than the coffin of the strangled governor that had never been removed!

"I swore a blue streak—and slid off faster than I have moved for a long time. It was stupid, of course, but after you've been talking ghosts for half a day you certainly have the jimjams. Then I thought what dumbbells they were; why in the name of hades hadn't they removed the coffin out of the town and given somebody else the burden of looking after the ghost? But soon I began to figure that they had reasons for that—they didn't want any chance inspection of the corpse. They had evidently thought that with all the stories there were about, their

best guess was to keep the coffin where it wouldn't be in the public eye, so to speak.

"Having come to this conclusion, I tiptoed away, purposely leaving the torch alight on the coffin. It threw a beam of light directly on the doorway leading to where I was camped; I hoped at least that would give me a working chance to get a pot-shot at the source of the trouble.

"The wind had risen a bit, and the paper windows in all the rooms began flapping. That meant a lot of dampness as well as wind—everybody knows that. Presently there was a great big *plop* outside. That reassured me. No ghost that. The roof had been shot to pieces by the bombardment, and I knew that a big chunk had just lobbed off on to the ground. If it had been one of them watching he would, of course, have had it that the ghost had climbed the roof and was trying to destroy the place in which his body was confined.

"I kept going with the beer, and it must have been about two o'clock before I became sleepy and stretched out on the string bed. That was my big mistake. Although this ghost palaver was all a fairy-tale to me, you can't expect a man when he wakes up suddenly not to do something foolish—although, when you see the way it worked out, it was the key to the puzzle.

"You remember I said I had left one of the torches blazing on the coffin? I forget how many hours they should be good for; but this one was in any case a dud. When I woke up the light was down almost to zero. So dim you didn't think anything of it. It flickered, too; and then, without any warning, the torch crashed to the ground.

"Normally, there would be nothing funny in that either. The top of their coffins, being curved to represent boats,

the thing may just have slipped off in a thoroughly understandable way. But I was irritated because I had been startled, and pulling out one of my Webleys I let drive the whole magazine through the doorway, making a fearful din.

"Here I ought to throw in a little detail to explain why this particular thing happened. You know the ordinary nickel-headed bullet? It drills a neat hole and passes into space. I've had experience of their lack of stopping-power, so I always have my cartridges converted. Send them to the shops, and drill a bit off the ends and slit them, too. That makes an improved dum-dum; makes them spread on impact in an amazing way.

"Well, my nine shots had done the job successfully on that jolly coffin. Three or four must have landed within an eight-inch circle; they had knocked out a great wad of wood on both sides, and there being no metal to stop them, the dry lime in the coffin had been shot out in handfulls and splashed all over the place. Cheerful yarn, this —but it's got to be told. Well, I concluded after a very brief inspection that the gentleman who had died too young would have to be re-coffined, if he was to be decently buried. As I was responsible for the damage, I determined to look into matters a bit more. The lids with them are not screwed down as with us; they fit into grooves and are so heavy that they can barely be lifted. I managed to do the trick with this one, and I at once noticed a curious thing. Half the lime had poured out at one end, but there didn't seem to be as much of it anywhere as there should have been. I couldn't help knowing, as we've lost men at the works; there's always the same practice; the coffin is filled brim-full with lime on top of the dear departed. What I'm coming to is this:

—after poking about gingerly for some time, and digging down with my revolver, I satisfied myself beyond a doubt that there was no corpse at all. What do you think of that?"

Trent and Kettling, who had been listening in dead silence, exclaimed almost simultaneously in amazement:

"The coffin was empty?"

Shardun nodded, and scratched his neck thoughtfully.

"That gave me enough to think about until dawn, believe me. What I wanted to know very badly was who had made it empty; had the little general done this as a blind, or was someone double-crossing him? You see my point? If he had done it for reasons of his own, all very good, since he was the man in authority and it was his funeral anyway. But if someone else had done it, if he knew nothing about it, it meant that there was a group in his own camp up against him, secretly playing against him, like the men who had got the money for the fourteen thousand coffins to bury the fourteen thousand victims and who had quietly made away with the dollars.

"After dawn I wasn't left long in doubt. That little orderly they call the Rat, who never seems to sleep and is always nosing around, was in by four A.M. to find out about the pistol-shots. We couldn't talk to each other much excepting by signs; but I showed him exactly what I had done, and then led him to the coffin and showed him that it was empty.

"His jaw dropped with a click, and he jabbered to beat the band. Of course, being an ignorant country bumpkin, it was proof to him that the corpse had got up and gone away, and that there was no possible means of coping with the evil thing. But for me his excitement was a clear proof that the little general had coffined his victim per-

fectly squarely just as he said he had; if he had done anything different, and staged an elaborate comedy, the first person to know about it would have been the Rat, who does his dirty work. Ergo, he was being double-crossed—there was a group in his camp who had some plot against him, and at the right moment would produce the body of the strangled man as grand-stand play.

"I managed to get it into the orderly's head to fetch one of the interpreters, and when I had him, I marched into our little man and sprang my tale. He didn't even wait until I had got to the end. He rushed into the room, had the whole coffin opened up, and stood white with rage. No more ghost-business in it for him—he got my meaning long before the translator had finished translating. Then he stood with his hand behind his back, thinking with a frown on his face, you know the way he does—Napoleon on the *Bellerophon*. Presently he beckoned to me, and sent the interpreter off with a string of oaths that made him fade like a figure on the screen. He even got rid of the Rat. When we were absolutely alone, he took out his pocket-book and, searching through it, produced two cards,—your two. *'To-lan-to, Ko-to-ling,'* he said to me, pronouncing your names in the native way, and vigorously gesticulating. 'Good idea,' I replied, 'I'll get them. You want advice.' So here I am, and we can all go back tonight and be there by morning. Now for a spot of iced beer. What do you think about it all?"

Trent, with his finger on the bell, turned:

"Kettling knows them better than any of us."

The scholar shook his head.

"One can only guess. It's probably his staff; all these plots start with the staff. The ghost part is real to the bulk of the army and the population, but not to the men in

the know. Of course, there's a league with another group somewhere. This is creating the right atmosphere to destroy him."

"Exactly," agreed Shardun. "And that's where our combination comes in. Look here, you'll come, won't you, Trent?"

"I don't see what I can do," said Trent doubtfully, thinking of how Kettling had once warned him.

Shardun had got his beer now, and was drinking it with gusto.

"But he asked for you—he kept on saying your name. You'll give him some new ideas—stiffen him. These people have no friends, not a single man ever has a friend he can trust. They're all out for the loot. You see, it's this way. When he gets an idea that he can utilize, he'll spring it on them all and outplay them so fast they won't know what's happened. Besides, they're on the run already, now that he knows the corpse is stolen."

"We must make him regain ascendancy," remarked Kettling reflectively.

"Exactly," agreed Shardun. "We're in the soup just now. If I'm in the soup, so are you, Kettling. If we don't act we'll be crowded to the wall."

"Ah, we must prevent that," said the scholar, beginning to think of the marvellous things he had been able to purchase with his new source of income. "Decidedly, we must act firmly. I think we ought to go."

"If we're going to catch the night train there's no time to lose," continued Shardun, standing up and looking round as he heard voices. "I rely on you, Trent. Now, why are these confounded children trying to break in on us just at a critical moment?"

Enid, with that distinguished diplomat, Monsieur

Damian, at her elbow, had slid back the gold-paper doors and was peeping in.

"What in Heaven's name is taking place here?" she exclaimed. "It's nearly nine and we're all starved. Aren't we ever going to have any dinner?"

"A conspiracy," ejaculated Monsieur Damian, looking over her shoulder at Shardun's uniform and top-boots. "Chinese Gordon has come to life!"

There was suppressed laughter.

"Look here, Enid," said Shardun good-naturedly. "I wish you would keep the children on their playground. We've got serious business in here. No dinner for anyone here—at least not now."

She nodded, and the gold-paper doors closed again.

"Now," said Shardun, "we've got to hurry unless we wish to miss that train. Trent, you've got to do it. Be a sportsman. I give you ten minutes to throw some things together. You will? Good man! Kettling will have to go as he is. There'll be just time at the station to send a flash, so that he'll know that we are coming."

The next morning, when they arrived at their destination, they saw that no change had outwardly taken place. The sentries were still doubled everywhere; the policemen were still standing in pairs; the people were still hurrying along furtively.

"Cheerful atmosphere!" mumbled Shardun, sitting back in the car, which had been sent for them, as they sped along. "This fellow has about as much sense driving as a blind man. I hope he gets us there alive."

At the door of the Yamên they halted a moment to take counsel.

"Now," said Shardun, "for Heaven's sake don't attach

any importance to anything the little general says. Answer him straight when he asks for advice. Plump for action."

They were received with ceremony, as if they had been potentates. The guards clicked their heels and presented arms; the card-bearers marched ahead, holding their cards aloft so that everyone might know who were honouring the Yamên with a visit. General Wang, in undress uniform, acted just as ceremonially until he had them safely in his own inner room and the servants bearing tea and cakes had duly departed.

Then he went to the door, locked it with European directness, and put the key in his pocket.

"Well, you have heard?" he remarked to Trent and Kettling in the vernacular. "What do you think of things now?"

"We wish to hear what you have to say first," said Trent, looking at him. "We have only heard directly from you once by letter, when you gave the account of what had happened here subsequent to your visit to us in the Capital."

"That is true," said General Wang thoughtfully. "I gave you the official report with a few friendly words interjected."

"Ah," said Kettling, in a way he might have done if someone had gravely informed him that the world was not really flat but most demonstrably an oblate spheroid. "That is what I thought."

General Wang's eyes travelled from one to the other in a portentous manner.

"It was necessary to kill him," he remarked, as if he had been asked a question, which indeed he had. "He deserved execution. The usual way would have been pub-

licly, after due proclamation. But there were reasons for secrecy. His connections were many; the bandits had commenced pouring in from the hills almost openly; the local soldiery were unreliable. When he had disclosed where his treasure was secreted, I acted."

"Ah!" said Kettling a second time, as if the obvious once more had been made clear. "And then?"

"After that there were no circumstances of importance."

Kettling bowed as if he had been much impressed, and then looked at the ceiling fixedly as if he were making an invocation.

"Who is there among all your higher officers whom you suspect of ill-will and jealousy?" he inquired in his precise voice.

General Wang's eyes narrowed. He took a sip from his cup of tea, set it down with great deliberation, and then delivered himself sharply as a dog barks.

"All of the new division."

"All!" repeated Trent as well as Kettling. Then they turned to Shardun and said to him in English, "He suspects all the new crowd; this is going to be a tough job;" which elicited the muttered comment, "Let him hang the lot."

"Yes," resumed General Wang, without affectation. "All are disaffected since so much money came into my hands. Not that they expected to share directly in this sum, but they counted on a lessening of my system of control; they believed that I would wink at practices common here; that I would no longer inspect the rolls and demand that the ration strength be the real strength. Seven will never count as ten with me; so hatred has increased. Per-

haps the removal of the corpse of the governor conceals some purpose of revenge. Just as the money for the coffins was divided, so will the profit of the new enterprise be shared."

"Is that proved?" inquired Kettling.

General Wang bowed his head.

"Since last night. I had the guild of coffin-makers before me. Confronted with death, they confided that the money had been divided among many, including every grade above battalion commander in the local troops."

"An incredible thing," remarked Trent.

"I have been meditating regarding punishment," said General Wang. "But if I shoot them now who will there be left to command the local troops? One hundred and more are involved." He said this sadly, as if it were incredible that human nature could be so treacherous.

"Then what?" inquired Kettling.

"I shall wait a propitious moment regarding punishment——"

And the two who could understand him thought the way he pronounced those words the most merciless thing they had ever heard.

Silence ensued. Shardun, drowsy in his chair, sat up and yawned and rubbed his face.

"What's happening?" he muttered in his quick way. "Machinery jammed?"

"In a sense," responded Kettling. "Still, we are making progress. Truth will out."

"Not if they can help it," muttered Shardun, "but stay with it if he's really squealing. Then we'll know what to do."

General Wang looked up interrogatively.

"What does *Sha-doon* say?" he inquired, pronouncing the name in the native way so clearly that the owner of it fixed his blue eyes on him.

"He says to proceed with the discussion—to continue until we find the solution."

"Good, good!" said General Wang briskly. "Let us forget revenge. You are my closest advisers. How can I re-establish general confidence?"

"Find out where all the corpses are and give them proper burial," said Trent. "Deal with things in a regular way, no matter what it costs you in money."

"Are you agreed?" inquired General Wang, turning to Kettling.

"Yes—certainly."

"Then it shall be done. And afterwards?"

"I would take up the matter of the late governor," said Trent. "This is a matter which cannot be laid aside, and about which there should be no further secrecy. A full statement should be published giving all details of his past, of his peculations, of the harm he has inflicted on the city, and of the punishment you meted out. Now that he has been dead several weeks the news is generally known. You had the right under martial law to execute him?"

"Certainly I had the right," agreed General Wang.

"I would put a threat into my proclamation," continued Trent, "that any who are misguided enough to side against you will suffer the same fate. I would call for the body to be returned to his family. No secrecy at all—that is what I recommend."

"And you?" said General Wang, turning to Kettling. "Do you agree?"

"Certainly."

"Then it shall be done. And afterwards?"

Trent said something to Kettling in English, and Shardun sat up.

"Are you through? Has he consented to hang the lot? Now's my chance. It's about the artillery. He's agreed with me in principle every time I've mentioned it and done nothing at all. I want him to put in a European organization, to chuck the slipshod way they've got of lumping everything together. No more mixed batteries, tell him. Look here, explain to him he ought to keep the artillery right under his finger—better pay, better organization, better men. Some day it may save him."

They talked together in two languages for a long time, and once again the words came:

"It shall be done."

When the last scrap of aid and comfort had been extracted from these three, General Wang took the key from his pocket and unlocked the door; after which he went to where a blue cloth curtain was hanging and swept it back, disclosing his secretary in black, who was sitting writing so that every word that had been pronounced would be recorded.

"To the feast, to the feast," he declared, glancing at his watch and pretending not to notice the nonplussed looks of the others. "The feast is now ready, the hour has arrived. Let us all be happy, now that you have brought happiness to us again."

He stepped out with a bow of apology that he should go first into the main hall. The orderlies, seeing him appear, cried to the sentries who came stiffly to the present. A bugle sounded discordantly, and many doors opened hurriedly. All the staff and officers of the new

division, including every battalion commander, poured out, saluting and clicking their heels endlessly, and preserving a most solemn demeanour.

Behind came the three friends, not speaking, not caring to speak, vaguely aware that it was a death-feast for the hundred or more—death at the propitious hour.

BOOK III

THE DOGS OF WAR

I

Mid-summer had come.

The heat was intense, all-pervading. The copper sun in the heavens dominated everything; it made one understand why men had once kissed their hands to it, saluting such luminous might because its power was greater than all the powers of the earth.

In the streets were stands piled high with water-melons, green black-striped globes, balanced one upon the other, or split open, ready for eating, coral against the green. The heavy barbaric smell of bronzed bodies, stripped to the waist, accompanied these things. Wherever there was a bit of shade men were idling, either fanning themselves or stretched full-length on the earth. The soil itself, cracking under this intensity, broke increasingly into powder which was swept into the air by every passing vehicle, choking all alike. Only in the trees was there energy; there the cicadas sung a tantalizing song which sounded like a ceaseless, senseless repetition of *"che languide carezze. . . ."*

Gladys, high up in the great pile of the modern hotel, arranged her day so that she only went out when the coolness of the night still lingered on in the morning, or when the great ball of fire had swept down below the western hills. Mrs. Briller could now hobble a few paces with a stick, and was really ready to leave the hospital. Yet she declared that she would not go until she was completely cured beyond any shadow of doubt.

"Not until I'm hundred per cent sound," she said, with a shrewd smile. "I might slip when no one was paying attention to me, and then I'd have to begin all over again. I couldn't face it—my nerves would give way."

One afternoon Enid came to see her.

"It's time you got away," she expostulated, after she had listened to this argument. "We're going to the seaside. It's cruelty in town just now. I would have taken the children long ago, only they've been invited elsewhere."

Mrs. Briller agreed that it was hot; yet to her the heat was delightful because the doctors said that it was good for her cartilages. "Besides I'm not uncomfortable at all," she added. "What with electric fans and iced drinks and this wonderful building I'm better off than most people in the world." Then she inquired, as if by an afterthought:

"Is Mr. Trent going, too?"

Her visitor threw her a quick look. Then she said negligently:

"Not at once. He's got a regular routine. He comes down for short trips. Finally, he goes off by himself to the mountains when the shooting commences. He likes to be on the move."

"I'm going to catch up with a number of things myself as soon as I can get out," remarked the vigorous old lady.

"Are you going to run down 'The Hundred Horses,'" inquired her visitor smilingly, remembering how she had once thirsted after Castiglione's *chef d'œuvre.*

"Perhaps, perhaps," replied Mrs. Briller, nodding her head mysteriously, because she hated, like every collector, to let anyone into her secrets. "I've got all sorts of fish to fry. The whole town is waiting for me, judging by the

number of messages I receive. I shall be ruined. Everything they have on earth is apparently to be mine."

"That's the trouble, they overdo things," agreed Enid. "My husband has had all kinds of properties thrust on him—ridiculously cheap, of course, but very speculative as an investment. He's got a safe full of title-deeds. What's the use of it when the end of the world is coming here?"

She busied herself with a powder-puff and a tiny looking-glass as if preparing to meet that event.

"Is that really so?" remarked Mrs. Briller, marvelling again at her admirable appearance. How old was she—thirty, forty, fifty? There was nothing to show, not a thing. Even in the hard, clear summer light her skin seemed youthful and unwrinkled. And her taste was good—very neat, with a touch of severity which suited her as nothing else could. "Do you really believe the stories they tell, or is it just the fashion to say the country is damned beyond salvation?"

Enid shrugged her shapely shoulders.

"That's what the men all say—they must know, as they are in touch with affairs. The only confirmed optimist is our wonderful Shardun, and he's making so much money that he doesn't care what happens. Look what he's just given me as part of the loot!"

She laughed as she showed a pretty gold buckle picked out with delicate bits of jade.

"Very good taste," agreed Mrs. Briller. "Fancy his having time to remember his friends. He sent Gladys something, too, the other day. He's certainly a character."

"A gambler!" put in Enid, less enthusiastically, it seemed to Mrs. Briller's attentive ears, as though the men-

tion of Gladys had done that. "I've never known a man to take such chances. There's nothing he won't gamble on. I hear he's got two ships now and is going to get more. He jumps from one thing to another, yet lands on his feet every time. I couldn't sleep if I thought my husband was doing such things. Now I must be going—really. It's not good-bye but *au revoir* after the summer; for you won't have gone, will you? We're off tomorrow."

Left alone, Mrs. Briller closed her eyes and thought over all her visitor had said. Why had she taken the trouble to come—what was in her mind? There was not much to take hold of—hardly a thing excepting that Trent had bought more property than was safe. That was a new fact—yet it was irrelevant. She reflected that she had always thought of him as an explorer; perhaps he had been one once and had been forced to settle down. Everything seemed very different from what she had once conceived when she had first had a glimpse into these people's lives on the train. How curious was existence out here; irrational in a way, yet more rational in another. Men and women were the same everywhere—precisely and prosaically the same, with very little in their lives except in those rare moments when passion appeared. . . .

She thought of Kettling's story; well, why shouldn't this woman have seized the chance offered her—why shouldn't she have acted as her instinct prompted her?

Now her mind turned to Gladys. Imagine Gladys doing anything of the sort. She was amazed that she should have been so ready to condone this woman's doubtful conduct. This was her third husband; Monsieur Damian had assured her that he knew it from official documents. She

had had more than her fair share of the men. Some day Gladys would be making a choice—some day she would be choosing her man and going through all sorts of contortions no doubt. If she made a mistake why shouldn't she correct it—why shouldn't she do that as well as any other person? And she would. She was just as strong-minded as this other woman—younger, too, and gaining in experience every day by meeting men engaged in all sorts and conditions of affairs.

But was she meeting them? This oldish woman, with the strong, prominent nose, fussed with her hands, and confessed to herself that she did not know; no doubt Gladys amused herself at games with a great number, but that was all. Trent—there was the unanswered interrogation. Something in this silent man seemed oddly to attract the girl. Why should it? Was it merely that amazing, tantalizing competitive impulse so deep in every woman?

Trent—the name was solid and serious, quite impossibly so. She remembered as a very young girl how that name had once been in everyone's mouth; it was a ship or something in the Civil War in America which had been a turning-point. Her father had spoken of it; the recollection rose out of a void and then disappeared again. It would never do for Gladys to allow her affections to become really engaged; the fury of this other woman would be as no other fury in the world. She must speak to her about finding someone to take her off throughout this last period of the summer. It could be arranged with dozens of people, now that they were so well known to the community. She could not be left here—with Trent always in the offing, and no watchful eyes about. . . . Her mind was made up—she would be inflexible. And over the hos-

pital verandahs the cicadas in the trees sang, just as they were singing everywhere, that interminable, foolish song, about languid caresses. . . .

Yet when Gladys came a little later, carrying her tennis racket in one hand, with a filmy piece of silk for her shoulders in the other, she hesitated. How should she commence? Instead of deciding she talked about her own improving condition.

"Mrs. Trent delayed me," remarked Gladys presently. "I'm late all round. My partners will be angry. Still, I'm not going to hurry away on that account, Aunt Edith."

"So she went round to see you," rejoined her aunt reflectively. "She was here, you know, saying good-bye—no, not good-bye but *au revoir* as she carefully remarked. She didn't mention to me that she was going on to see you."

"She never mentions anything she can avoid," said Gladys, fixing her blue eyes on her aunt.

"And why, pray?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"She believes in keeping her own counsel. Certainly she doesn't let her right hand know what her left hand is doing. That's scriptural—you can't take exception to the Scriptures, Aunt Edith."

The old lady smiled grimly.

"I don't. But you should look up the quotation. It has to do with charity. 'When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right doeth.' "

"Fancy your remembering that!" exclaimed Gladys, amazed. "We're so ignorant nowadays. Do you know I heard a woman ask only yesterday who was this Barabbas Dr. Kettling so constantly spoke of."

Mrs. Briller shifted some books from the chair by her

side. Was it worth while showing charity to people who did not deserve it?

"What did Mrs. Trent come to you about—just to say good-bye?" she remarked, aloud.

"Oh, dear no," rejoined Gladys gaily, "probably to find out where I was going for the rest of the summer. She went so far as to invite me to stay with her."

"She did—what did you say?"

"I told her that if you weren't going, I wasn't either. And as I knew you wouldn't budge, I wouldn't. She didn't like that at all." Gladys laughed more because of her aunt's disapproving face than of anything else. "Do you think I'm as bad as all that, Aunt Edith?"

"We women are all alike, child," murmured the older woman. "If you had anything to conceal you'd be the same as the rest. I was as frank a girl as you ever saw, but there were times when I exercised discretion."

"Indeed," cried Gladys, swinging her racket at an imaginary ball. "Do tell me about it, Aunt Edith."

"These things were so long ago I've forgotten them. Besides, we're at the ends of the earth here; what happened ages ago elsewhere is of no account. I'm much more interested in the present—and the future."

"Do you think you'll be ready to move in a month, Aunt Edith?"

"I shall be able to walk exactly when I said I would, in October, and not a day before. Are you sure you don't want to go away?"

"Quite—at least not now. If it gets much worse, I'll see."

"I shall remember that as a promise," concluded her aunt.

Meanwhile it was getting hotter and hotter. The poor,

panting devils, stripped to the loins, hauling men and merchandise about for a pittance, were wrung to the withers. The copper sun above them had acquired a death-dealing fury; all Nature declared that this was the season of leisure, and yet these soulless ones must toil. The cicadas in the trees declared the truth and they would not hear it.

The town emptied day by day; each evening saw fewer familiar faces. Those who remained did so because duty bade them, not because they wished to.

Yet it was pleasant enough in the evenings—enchanting, even, on the great flat roof of the hotel where nightly an orchestra played diverting music and a dancing floor of asphalt offered its hospitality. Gladys, dining by herself under the stars, learnt speedily enough that there was a routine here as in everything else in the town—a sort of summer technique borrowed perhaps from Spain. Punctually at nine most people dined; at ten three young men of three different nationalities, who had pursued her from the very beginning, whose names she had such difficulty in recalling, came upon the scene, with many others, clad in their neat white mess-jackets, and requested dances. Sometimes she said she was too tired, and went down to bed. On other occasions it amused her to accept, and then to cover these youths with confusion by finding fault with everything they did. She found their use of English, which they had recently acquired, very defective; she doubted the correctness of many things they did—she even criticized their dancing, which she knew was unjust.

"But we try, we try," they declared. "Why so cruel to those who try? And we have to study Chinese as well—" as if that excused all sins of omission and commission.

Often there were large parties, and it was very gay under the moon as if there were not a care in the world.

Once—an occasion she never forgot—Shardun and Kettling and Trent marched in quite unexpectedly all together, and asked if they might sit at her table.

"First holiday I've had for months," Shardun declared. "I've come to get some political dope. Let's celebrate. I've got an eighteen-hour day and a seven-day week, and I see shells even in my dreams. Pity me." Yet he laughed heartily enough, as if he had told her the funniest thing in the world.

The servants in their cool white grass-cloth coats gathered round him as if he were a pot of honey; his largesse was known—they thirsted for it just as he thirsted for gigantic results. At his slightest gesture they conjured up exactly what he wanted, and then stood waiting for his next command.

"Who's going to be blown to perdition this time?" she inquired.

"They all deserve it—they're all asking for it," Shardun assured her. "Ask old Kettling about their tricks."

The scholar looked up nervously.

"Have we no secrets?" he inquired, so seriously that they all burst out laughing.

"None at all," said Shardun. "Why should we have? Miss Cunningham, ask anything you please and I'll see to it that you get most complete answers. We're doing something perfectly legitimate. They forgot to provide for us when they laid their blessed arms embargo on this benighted land. We're manufacturers doing our level best to provide a clean, wholesome article in the interests of good government. And we're not loafing on the job, either. If we can keep up our present pace our little general will either blow up or bust before the year is out. He'll have to blow up in self-defence."

"What's he mean?" said Gladys, turning to Trent.

"He doesn't mean anything except the little general will have to fight to get rid of his surplus. I've been warning Shardun not to run the thing to death."

"Why don't you listen, Captain Shardun?" said Gladys.

"Not while I'm paid," he mumbled, dropping into his peculiar way of speaking again. "As long as I'm paid it means they've got the money and it's worth giving them the goods. When the money stops so do I. Sounds as if I were a grasping beggar, but I've got my reasons. I will want a real holiday one of these days—the sort of thing Trent can afford himself."

Trent disagreed.

"I'll never be able to afford another if you fellows teach them how to blow everything to pieces."

"As deep in as all that?" mumbled Shardun. "Start pulling out is my advice; cut out investing in this country. Miss Cunningham—would you believe it?—he won't have anything to do with things like my factories. Yet there's money in it—plenty of money. It's about the only thing left they will pay prompt cash for. They're crazy just now about everything that blows up with a bang! I mentioned the other day something about tanks to the little general. He'd never even heard of them. And this nearly ten years after the Somme! But when I made him a rough drawing and he was wise to the idea, he went nearly crazy. Must have a dozen right away—fifty if I could get them. I told him about the embargo for the hundredth time, but that made no difference in his young life. Must have them at all costs—just the things for him. Suggested to me that I bribe someone in England to steal drawings of the latest type, and then get out men to build them. You can't beat them."

Kettling looked at his glass that sparkled with ten thousand bubbles. He knew that Shardun would do exactly the same thing he always did; try to make him drink so much that he would become effusive and contradictory in his speech. Yet he did not resent it; he found it flattering that anyone should take such interest in him.

"The great blow is not going to fall the way you think," he murmured. "Nobody has noticed yet the quarter it is coming from—not a soul. Just now it is a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, but presently it will cover the whole sky and will frighten everyone. I'm sure of it——"

"Rats—" muttered Shardun derisively.

"Won't you tell me about it?" asked Gladys.

Kettling shook his head.

"It's too soon—you might not understand; you certainly wouldn't believe me."

Shardun gave another disapproving snort.

"We know what he's got in his old head, don't we? He's thinking about the Communists. He's got a theory that that's going to break everything down; that people like me will be ultimately left high and dry."

"The masses are becoming infected," announced Kettling lugubriously.

"I can draw you a map to show you why that's impossible," said Shardun.

"The schools are the seed-plots," Kettling went on unperturbed. "The simplified way of writing that has come into vogue is helping them immensely. Everyone can read what they are saying. They have commenced propagandizing. I know how far it has gone. Your armies and your weapons will be useless when the men refuse to fight."

Shardun laughed.

"Bosh—you're utterly wrong. As long as they get food they will obey."

"We've had proof to the contrary."

"Not at all."

Stimulated by their surroundings, the two men began talking more loudly.

The servants in their cool white grass-cloth coats were listening greedily. Their eyes were fixed on the gigantic Englishman, their lips parted as if their lives depended on hearing every word. How much did they understand? Was it really only money they thirsted after?

"I say," said Trent, in an undertone. "We're too free and easy. There're other people in the world——"

Shardun threw back his head. His immensely powerful fist was on the table and he raised it.

"They don't worry me—I'd take on the crowd single-handed. I've got two thousand workmen. I know how to handle them. The white man's burden, you know. Carry on, Kettling."

Nevertheless he dropped his voice, and turned a bit so as to be more confidential.

"That comes from handling high explosive all day," remarked Trent to Gladys. "There's something in what Kettling says. I noticed it the moment I got back. There's been a subtle change. Down at the seaside it was as peaceful as a churchyard. Here it is not so peaceful. There is something under the surface again."

They discussed it in a rambling way. Then she said suddenly:

"Were you only back this morning?"

"Yes—I had a week away."

She glanced round. The other two were still arguing hard; they were not likely to interrupt.

"What was it like?" she asked in a lowered voice, impelled by a motive she could not define.

"Not nicer than this," he replied gallantly. "But the water was beautiful and it was restful. You ought to get away for a bit."

"I'll think about it," she answered, a little absently. "I hate to leave my aunt—it seems like desertion. Do I look as washed out as some of the others?"

He looked at her critically.

"A little pale, perhaps, just a shade," he said.

"That's only contrast. You're so tanned—as if you'd been sitting in the sun for hours and hours."

At that he looked self-conscious; she had the feeling that she had been flirting and that he knew it.

"Swimming is what tans one," he remarked, in a matter-of-fact way.

The orchestra struck up, and they went out on the diminutive asphalt square for a bit. Was it fancy or were people exchanging looks as they saw them together? She tried to delude herself that it was only fancy; but presently Monsieur Damian went by and his eyebrows went up—significantly. Annoyed, she stopped suddenly, made some trifling excuse and went back.

"Why did you do that?" he said to her, thoroughly mystified.

"Never ask a woman why," she rejoined. "She'll never tell you the reason. If she did it would not help matters."

"That's the first time you've made that sort of answer," he commented, mistaking her motive entirely. "I'm sure you'd be better for a bit of a change."

The next day she went to see the soft creature whose marriage to the little general seemed such an inexplicable mystery to her. Kettling had arranged it and came to

fetch her. She was still vaguely annoyed with herself for what she had done the evening before, and she hoped that this would divert her. Kettling came in Trent's car which he said he had borrowed, and he added something a little vague about going across the street when they had done with their ceremonial visit.

On the threshold of the modest little house, Gladys paused and looked back. It was strange to see the great compound wall of the Trents on the opposite side of the street.

"This is where the old lumber-merchant used to stand," explained Kettling, "and think up schemes how he could outwit the foreigner and get the property that had slipped through his fingers. And now he has been mouldering in the soil for years. It would have been better if he had got the property—perhaps."

He seemed very reflective—despondent even, as indeed he always was after an evening spent away from his books.

"Is the white man on the run?" said Gladys, half-laughingly, half-seriously.

"Who knows—who knows?" he replied. "But there's pessimism in the air."

They passed into the long passage leading to the inner courtyards. A mendicant priest in a yellow robe, edged with black, was standing there, singing an endless song begging for alms; and when something had been given him he went on singing another endless song of thanks.

"Life is utterly different for them, isn't it?" remarked Gladys. "The moment you cross the threshold you are in a different world. I had the same feeling in that restaurant. Here's the little woman."

She was standing there ceremonially, dressed in her best to receive her guests at the doorway of the main pavilion

precisely as custom demanded. When they left she would accompany them to the street, every door flung wide open to speed them on their way.

"This is a miserable house," she declared, in the stereotyped away. "But the honour done today will give it value."

"I wish I could say something half as nice as that," laughed Gladys, when Kettling had translated it. "Can't you invent something equally flattering? Assure her that now I have seen the wife of the great general in her home my sense of security is more perfect."

But when this had been translated the little woman made a wry face. She became spirited in her manner; her views were so decided as to be quite modern.

"We are not at all safe," she declared. "The terror of ghosts was known to me as a child in this very street, and when I went to live in the general's Yamên worse appears. The signs are not good."

"Does she really believe that?" inquired Gladys, interested by this view of life. "Isn't she going back soon?"

No—it appeared she was not. Her manner suggested that she was sceptical of any amelioration in the Yamên of the provincial capital, and that one experience was enough for her.

"I suppose we were the same hundreds of years ago. We believed in magic and witches and things like that," remarked Gladys. "Is it polite for me to inspect everything? I want to see exactly how they live."

"You can ask anything, look at everything, and inquire the price of everything," said Kettling. "And in the end you will be just as wise as at the beginning regarding what they attach importance to——"

The little wife was doing her best to be entertaining.

She brought out all her silks, and showed her clothes and her bracelets; and finally, with a mysterious smile, led them to a great package covered with blue cloth which she commenced untying.

"What on earth is in there?" murmured Gladys.

"She says it's the nicest thing she's got, a present from the general. It's a European music-box."

The little woman, with the greatest pride, had lifted the lid, and set some mechanism moving. Immediately two tiny little Eighteenth Century figures sprang out and bowed and postured, while with much wheezing and whirring an old melody tinkled faintly, the ghost of affluent days.

"Stop it, stop it!" murmured Gladys. "It's enough to give one the blues. Tell her it's wonderful, but we have to be going. What a climax!"

Kettling added a touch.

"You see those doors leading into another compound? That's where the poor relatives live, and that's where every quarrel starts."

The little wife followed their looks as they went out, and tried to put meaning to their words.

"Are you speaking of the other courtyards?" she inquired in the vernacular.

"I was explaining the advantages of the family system," said Kettling, very solemnly.

No sooner had they been bowed out of the house than he remarked:

"Wouldn't you like to see where the haunted well was, and have me explain it all now that that evil woman has gone away?"

Gladys threw him a look of surprise. This was the first time he had spoken in such a way.

"I don't think you ought to say that sort of thing. It doesn't help," she objected.

But Kettling was impenitent.

"Don't try to convert me. I enjoyed saying those words thoroughly and absolutely. It is splendid speaking one's mind." He was walking bare-headed into Trent's compound, now that the sun had gone down, swinging his hat in his hands. "There's the place. You see, it's completely filled in. The unfortunate ghosts were buried alive!"

He laughed at his phantasy and then sent a message for Trent by an old gardener who, as he sat on his haunches plucking the weeds, seemed like a figure in a carving.

The sun had pitched down below the horizon and a delightful coolness invaded the air. Trent joined them and they talked of many things. In the gathering dusk, Gladys forgot the hour—or if she did not forget she was disinclined to remember it. So it happened that for the first time in many long weeks she missed calling in to see her aunt before the hour that the hospital was closed to visitors.

That made her night again a little sleepless.

II

One morning, when Kettling was sitting in contemplation of a Buddhist painting, which he greatly revered, he received an urgent communication from Shardun which sent him rushing round the dusty streets in a fever of excitement.

Shardun's letter was like himself—hasty, energetic, acute, full of slang culled from half the market-places of the world—yet somehow conventional. He wrote:

I still don't believe what you declared the other day, but something is spreading which is new to me. I begin to understand sabotage. They are not daring to indulge in it too openly because of my mailed fist. But in quiet ways it is going on everywhere. I have had a fearful bill for breakages this month. Our current stops suddenly; something is always wrong with the dynamos, which are brand-new and without defect. I've called in all the foremen and told them I would use them as targets for the trench-mortars if they make me any angrier. Sullen looks—no improvement whatsoever. I'd have you come down and lecture them in best official style—only I don't believe it would help. I manhandled one fellow: I wish you could have seen the rest of them speed out of my office.

That's one phase. The other thing is more curious. It means that two completely separate movements are starting up, running perhaps parallel, perhaps head-on. I'm not wise enough to know which. One of my gum-shoe men reports that a very big fight is brewing about which General Wang doesn't know a thing. The whole country is to be mobilized. An order for 300,000 winter uniforms has been placed, broken up into small amounts so that it is hard to trace. My

man swears he has got the facts correctly. You know the uncanny way they nose things out; and you can trust 'em to sell their friends. He told me he got his first inkling from a relative who was trying to buy two million yards of English cloth. This was traced back to an army contractor, who was engaging tailors right and left and putting in dozens of sewing-machines. After that my man hit snags and couldn't get the rest of the story straight, but that dope was good enough for me.

Three hundred thousand men is a large force. Where do I come in? Who's the joss moving them? Here we are on a railway siding off a trunk-railway with no protection against the tide of war if it rolls our way. It means a combination of all the armies. If I put General Wang wise he may take a different view from mine. I have found it sound practice never to tell them anything: let them find it out from someone else, I say. As long as his payments come through why should I worry? But oughtn't I to prepare in some way? Let me have a reply—at once.

Kettling, having read this effusion five or six times, became exceedingly troubled. He had visions of his most profitable connection with Shardun suddenly ceasing. It had given him more money than he had ever had before; it had lifted him to new energy—changed his outlook. Money was important. He had never realized before how many distressing problems it could put to sleep—and how creative it could be. You could get on with things when you had money. He must see to it that he did his part in this matter without delay. So he obeyed the summons with scrupulous fidelity. He saw every possible person in every possible Yamên; he visited all the men he had known in past years, renewing acquaintance with an ardour which would have been suspicious anywhere but in this country of the blind. He talked to his friends confidently over cups of tea about everything excepting what

was on his mind. Only when he was leaving did he let drop a vague word or two, attempting to discover if there was anything important in this consecrated way which all perfectly understood.

He drew blank after blank. Nobody knew anything. He was sure they were not dissimulating; that he could guarantee from the muscles of their smooth cheeks, which always dropped when there was surprise or anxiety, leaving the mouth slightly open even when the eyes did not narrow by so much as the hundredth part of an inch.

After a few days he gave up the official world in despair and began working through people who dealt in supplies. He had a friend in the police administration who was occupied with such things. To him he told something—very guardedly. But although this man helped him readily enough and appeared trustworthy, there was little to learn. Then, when he had almost given up all hope, he suddenly made a great and amazing find. A vast number of medals had been ordered. He discovered that by pure chance, when he was talking about something quite different. The order had come from the provinces, but who had given it could not be ascertained; not a soul really knew, as the contract had been made through an agent who had paid down a substantial sum and gone his way. Kettling managed to secure one of the blanks; he even got one of the neat little red lacquered cases into which each of the medals were to be packed, on which was already stamped in graceful seal characters in gold and green the legend "Commemorative award." But the medals themselves were not to be completed until autumn, and he could learn nothing about the head which was to be placed on them.

He let a day or two pass before he communicated this intelligence to Shardun. Medals were certainly an amaz-

ing thing to find in combination with winter uniforms. It meant that this leader, whoever he was, was so sure of winning his campaign that he was planning many months ahead and had ordered his rewards in advance.

Kettling spent hours calculating all this on sheets of paper, and looking at his maps. It would be along the railways that it would come; warfare had been canalized in that way for years now; nothing very important ever happened far from the railways. They were now in August. That meant within four months, perhaps even three, the dogs of war would be unloosed. Then everything would stop; the factories would stop—Shardun would stop—his pay would stop. Confusion, panic, collapse—he had seen the process half a dozen times already. He would be back to his precarious existence which had been so accentuated since Government had been in disorder and his lecture-fees had gone into someone's war-chest.

He became deeply despondent and paced his courtyard with slow steps, his fine head, with its closely-cropped iron-grey hair, sunk between his shoulders as if the weight of his woes had become too great for him to bear.

Why could it not go on as at present; why was it always necessary for everything to break down in this country? And this political disaster would revive his slumbering quarrel with Enid—revive it as soon as she found out that Trent was assisting him again. In his mind's eye he saw her cold, clear profile, with the slightly rouged cheeks, looking at him disdainfully as if he were really a person worthy of disdain.

He delayed sending his report until the last possible moment. He hoped that something would come to obviate the necessity. But there was nothing, nothing but the

scorching sun in the heavens and the cicadas in the trees endlessly trilling their languid song. So finally he wrote a whimsical letter which had all sorts of unexpected results.

In answer to yours. I have sought far and wide in every conceivable quarter. I have interviewed fat men and thin men, and dishonest men and moderately honest men, not to forget the great class that acquires its information most undoubtedly from keyholes. Not the slightest murmur of anything of what you told me was there to be heard. My spirits rose. Your information was incorrect; that seemed proved beyond a shadow of a doubt. Then a queer thing came to light. There may not be three hundred thousand medals in the making, but there are a vast number. As you may know, it is the *cloisonné* shops that have the monopoly of this trade. All their factories are engaged in turning out blanks in an alloy which gives them a golden colour. A head is to be engraved on them. Whose head? The makers do not know: they swear that by everything they hold holy, protesting that since they have been my friend for years to lie would be impossible. That detail is withheld from them; only at the very last moment will they learn it.

A cunning man this, someone in the provinces with overweening ambitions who will trample on all his enemies, and hand out medals to his men in the conquered capital when the process is completed.

Winter uniforms and medals; what a combination of farsightedness, or amazing stupidity. A sober people gone mad have more eccentricity than the Gadarene swine. If you knew Greek I could quote you something which would make my point gleam like a diamond.

Last night I dreamed it was our General Wang who was the man. He had formed the grandiose plan which he was hiding from everyone, including our honoured selves. I pictured him as we saw him that day after we three had been locked in with him for so many hours, when he pulled the curtain aside and unmasked the secretary in black who had been writing down every word we had said. Then I pictured

him as he was when he unlocked the door and marched out with us, and the bugles sounded and all his officers poured out from countless doors, saluting him and clicking their heels, because they were invited to a feast, the feast which was as their death-feast. . . . Then I woke up and sweat poured from me in my excitement. I shouted as though I had seen a great vision, and my servants arose thinking that I had seen thieves. . . .

Alas, the dream was fickle. It cannot be. I can calculate mathematically that such a campaign is three steps higher than our man has yet climbed—it is aiming too high; even by a miracle he could not do it.

It is another—someone who will wreck everything you have done—wreck you miserably and utterly, and cast you down and abase you, rendering useless the toil, the care, the inventiveness, the resolution, the high courage you have shown in struggling with a monster of apathy.

That is the meaning of the winter uniforms and the medals.

This bizarre production, written with so much verve, reached Shardun just when he had so severely disciplined his men that the sabotage was ceasing. He looked over the sentences with no scholar's eye; yet the way they were put together held him and he could not sit quiet. So he drove his great red car up to the Capital at his usual furious pace and roared down the dusty streets to let the world know that he had arrived. It was so early in the morning that he turned in at the hotel, and ordered breakfast in an effort to let time catch up with him.

Even when he had finished it was still too soon; he could not go to see friends for serious talks at half-past seven in the morning.

He sat in the hall. With Elizabethan expansiveness he ordered beer in a tankard, and wondered about the secret leader who was to cast him down, while around him lan-

guid servants performed their morning tasks. And while he was thus idly engaged, who should appear looking as fresh as a rose but Gladys, going out to greet her aunt.

"Where on earth have you sprung from?" she exclaimed, opening her eyes in wonder, as she paused for a minute.

"I'll tell you about it if you will sit down," he replied, trying to tempt her, his blue eyes laughing down at her. "Don't say you won't. Things are in rather a mess. I'm on my way to Trent's, but I don't like to rout him out as early as this."

"You won't find him; he won't be back until tomorrow," she exclaimed, dropping into a chair.

He cast her a swift look, surprised that she should be so well informed.

"Damn!" he said, with energy. "Why didn't I know that? Has he gone off to the seaside again?"

She nodded, affecting indifference.

His blue eyes looked through her; he was no longer interested in knowing why she knew.

"I wish I'd thought of sending him a flash last night. I broke an invariable rule. Read that."

He pushed Kettling's letter across the marble table; then he watched her as she took in the meaning of those exotic phrases. Twice she read the letter through, attracted by what had been set down just as he himself had been.

"Do you understand it?" he asked, at last.

"I suppose I do," she murmured, "although I don't know what you wrote which called this forth. There's a war coming and both of you are afraid of it. Isn't it that?"

"It most certainly is," he said, with a sigh. "If Ket-

tling is correct, and everything is going to be wrecked, I shall be badly hit. You see, I'm a bit of an outlaw. I can put up a bluff, but there's no protection for me—the flag doesn't cover my goods." He gave a laugh. "If I hadn't been to Eton it would have gone hard with me already. And you can't blame anybody, can you?" He looked at her as if he wondered whether she saw his points, and then went on: "Now, you're a woman. You've got intuition. What would you do? Here's my letter to Kettling. Don't laugh at it. My stuff makes me sick when it's gone cold."

He dived into his pockets and pulled out another paper. He watched her read it just as he had watched her read Kettling's letter. But this time he did not prompt her—he did not ask what she thought.

"You've made a serious mistake," she commented. "You oughtn't to keep this information to yourself. The man who ought to know is the man whose money makes it worth while for you to work. I don't agree with your argument about letting people find out for themselves. People should not be allowed to find out things for themselves. It may be too late. They should be told. You're playing with edged tools and your hands will be cut."

"I've only one," he cried, amused by her lecture. He held up his mighty fist and looked at it fondly. Then he became serious. "I believe you're right. I believe I'd better tell the little general. Yes, I will, not later than tomorrow. I'm glad I met you. I owe you a lot for this advice. You can have anything you like," he ended, with a laugh.

She had risen to go.

"Is that a promise?" she said, looking him straight in the eye.

"It most certainly is."

"Well, I take you at your word. I want you to let Dr. Kettling have a holiday. We've been talking about an expedition into the hills and then down a river to the sea. I've forgotten the names, but everyone says it's enchanting, and I'm as keen on going as I have ever been in my life. Now, you can't refuse, because you've promised."

Her eyes were still fixed on him very seriously.

"What, Kettling needs a holiday?" he growled in his quick way. "Where do you get these plans from?"

She laughed at his abrupt, rough manner.

"I don't know. But I want Dr. Kettling to go, and he's afraid to ask as he says you might need him, and he's not likely to get work like yours again."

"How long will it take?"

"A month——"

"A month at such a time as this!" Shardun gave a growl, treating her exactly as if she were a man. "I might have the greatest need of him, and there you are wanting to leave me like a shorn lamb."

"Please," she said. "Besides, you've promised. It's not immediately, but at the beginning of next month."

"Right," he said suddenly. "I'll get along the best I can." He looked her up and down, as if he had just observed her, just seen how young and smiling she was.

"I'd like to come, too. Am I to turn out shells and mortars all the rest of my life?"

"Do," she cried. "You're just the man for the wilds."

He shook his head.

"No—not till I'm through. I'm going to carry on until I've made all this talk about saturation point having been reached in exploiting this country look like ten cents Mex. I'm giving them a run for their money they've never had

before. When I check out it'll be because they've got no more beans——"

He walked with her to the door.

A quarter of an hour later he roared in his great red car up to Kettling's ruined temple.

"Well, Professor, everything quiet here?" he called, so gaily as he came into the courtyard that Kettling, believing that in his wonderful way he had solved everything, became pale from excitement.

"There's nothing but what I wrote you," he remarked. "I'm surprised to see you. Has there been something new?"

Shardun nodded as he dropped into a chair.

"Yes, and I don't know what I'll do without you."

"Without me?" Kettling spoke faintly; the giant's manner had been too buoyant; something had undoubtedly occurred.

"I hear you're going on a trip," continued Shardun playfully. "At least Miss Cunningham tells me you are. Quick girl that, she's well posted; knew Trent was out of town. How did she know that? And she says we're all wrong in the way we've gone to work. We should have told the little general right away."

"Did she say that?" said Kettling, in a suffocated voice. He could hardly find words. It hadn't been that his services were to be dispensed with. He cleared his throat. "Perhaps it would be better to discard secrecy and get General Wang to make his own inquiries. I hope my going off won't be any inconvenience."

Shardun pulled a map off the table and went over it, picking out the mysterious marks which the scholar had made.

"Who in hades is this mysterious bird who's going to spring the great surprise on us?" he growled. "I see you've got all their names tabulated, but which one is it?"

Kettling changed his glasses and came and bent over him, pointing out what he thought.

"It's one of four—which one I can only guess. Each of the four has several provinces—therefore they're in the super-general class, and can force the smaller fry to follow them—" He talked glibly now, piling up an amazing number of facts.

"God!" exclaimed Shardun in disgust, throwing the map back on the table. "And they call that politics! Is it worth while my fortifying the factories?"

"You've got compound walls, haven't you?"

"Certainly."

"What else can you do—you can't make a fortress of it."

Shardun deposited his enormous sun-helmet on the floor, and began throwing paper pellets at it in a mechanical sort of way as if in explanation of the military plan which he feared might be put in operation against him.

"I've ripped out my siding already; nobody can wander down in a train and think that they can have everything by just taking it. I've mined the approaches so that if needs be we can give the first bunch a warm welcome. I've rearranged my lighting and got some tear gas. I've done every blessed thing I can think of, and now I'm inclined to trust to luck. I'll get all my drawings and dies to a safe place—I'll make the necessary arrangements right away. I wish I could understand which direction it was coming from, and how our man will be forced in."

Kettling looked surprised.

"That part is simplicity itself. He will receive an order

to march, and for the good reason that everyone will be doing that, he will be forced to march."

"But I thought all authority had gone!" exclaimed Shardun. "I thought this had become a free-for-all. Where does authority lie, if some bird who happens to have three or four provinces can make the others obey?"

"But you've explained it and you don't understand your own explanation," cried Kettling. "It's as easy as a child's book of pictures. The man with three or four provinces behind him pushes on all his troops in one great mass with promises of loot. They seize the railways, swamp the towns, and crowd on to the next armies, who are pushed along for the good reason that if they didn't they would be overwhelmed. Don't you remember how it was with Napoleon's armies in the retreat from Moscow?—they swept every corps with them, disorganizing them, corrupting them, until in the end there was nothing but an irresistible, headless throng flowing in one direction. It's that here more or less every time. Our General Wang, if he didn't come into line, would soon be isolated with his thirty or forty thousand men—isolated or assassinated. Simple as a child's book of pictures, you see, and just as picturesque."

"And afterwards what?" grumbled Shardun, smoking his pipe, and listening gravely enough.

"The same process—*ad infinitum.* On and on with their foolish wars which settle nothing——"

"And I'm doing my bit to assist them. I suppose you think I'm in the same boat."

Kettling nodded.

"Of course, of course, but you're in noble company; there have been many before you. Cannon were cast for the emperors by the Jesuits two hundred years ago—it's

what the West has always been teaching the East. The Jesuits were remarkably successful. The great Emperor Kang Hsi was so delighted that before all his Court he took off his sable vest and his magnificent coat and bestowed them on the venerable Father who was the chief gun-maker of his day as a mark of his satisfaction. He was a precious fellow, that Jesuit; you'll find all about him in the books. To salve his conscience he erected an altar with a crucifix in his foundry, and engraved on each cannon the name of an orthodox Christian saint so that their cannon-balls made their victims die in the odour of sanctity even if they hadn't been baptized."

"Is that true?" shouted Shardun, much amused. "What a chance I've missed! I could have made my mortars a regular Army List from Marlborough to Kitchener, and added to the national glory."

Kettling suddenly became morose.

"Glory, glory, where's the glory in death and destruction? Still, I'm in the same boat, very much so. Who am I to utter reproaches? *Vogue la galère!* I'm corrupted, involved as deeply as anyone else, and I have the doubtful advantage of knowing precisely what it all means. Never mind. *Vogue la galère,* let the ship sail on to perdition, friends and enemies all together. Are we going off today to inform the little general? I would like to get it over so as to prepare for that trip. I'm going to get Trent to come, and a Mrs. Hoskin who is an admirable artist, and several others."

"Is that so?" said Shardun, wrinkling his forehead, as he thought of Gladys and the way she had put it.

III

"THERE we are," said Kettling, taking Gladys for a moment by the arm. "We must not move another step. Here you can appreciate the vision as nowhere else. This is the 'Barrier of mountain and sea.' "

He clasped his hands and stood stock-still, as if his emotion had forced him to prayer. His tall, ascetic figure fitted in well with such a beatitude on that brilliant landscape. He was as one of the faithful, preaching the doctrine of happiness through the worship of the beautiful, and not very concerned about anything else.

"What a perfect day," she murmured in reply. "And what a perfect name, 'Barrier of mountain and sea.' This is the most wonderful thing I have ever seen."

They had completed their much talked-of expedition, and were resting by the sea before returning to the Capital. For ten days they had travelled together; seven of them in all. They had gone from the baking plain by pony caravan up through a pass which led them to the great forests where once had been conducted the Imperial Chase. Then, after exploring the magnificence of this mountain scenery, they had shot down a swift river in flat-bottomed boats, which took them through vast defiles for a hundred miles and more until before them lay the ocean.

Now from where they stood the towering mountains through which they had come were an indescribable grey. Rising tier after tier, and losing themselves in a dim

vagueness on the sky-line, they were like the mountains of a dream. In one place, a single powder-puff of cloud stood immediately over a high slope, casting a vast delicate shadow which moved slowly and sedately forward in the form of a giant hand. This silhouette, so curious and unexpected, was oddly attractive to the eye; constantly was it necessary to note it, to see how slowly yet inevitably it moved, like some coming event casting its shadow before. Winding across the mountains, sometimes lost to view and as suddenly reappearing, ran that cyclopean work, the Great Wall of China, the towers marking its progress looking in the distance like tiny knots in an incredible rope that had been wound round the face of the globe.

But it was away from the land that the glory of the day found its crown. For there, a few miles off, lay the emerald sea, without sails, without ships; as virginal as it had been from the beginning of time; sparkling, glistening, flashing, laughing; filling so much of the horizon that it seemed to be pouring in to drown the earth. Towards it, over the brown plain, ran the Great Wall, its line as clearly traceable here as on the mountain-sides, culminating in a great stone platform above the waves, where according to tradition the august builder had stood with all his Court centuries before Christ, naming this the greatest Barrier in all the world.

"As the sun goes down you will see new wonders," murmured Kettling. "Everything good finds expression here. Keep still and you will see."

The colouring of the mountains had changed. Purple was stealing over the far slopes and the brown earth flashed gold. There were angel faces in the incomparable whiteness of tiny fleecy clouds blown in from the water;

and now a delicate haze, like the veil of a bride, seemed to be dropping across land and sea. The odours of the growing crops mingled with this festival of the senses and induced a pagan mood.

Gladys stretched out her hands as if to grasp it all.

"Why do days like this pass?" she exclaimed, with sudden emotion. "Why cannot we always have the beautiful and the perfect—just like this?"

Kettling looked round at her in his queer, short-sighted way.

"Be independent of everything, independent of time, independent of place, independent of people," he suggested. "Live within yourself."

She shook her head.

"Some people may be able to do that, but not me. That's for nuns and monks. Don't you ever crave companionship?"

"Sometimes," he rejoined, "and then it's not always wise."

"But we're not born into the world only to be wise," she cried. "You want to eliminate all the essentials."

"Do I?" he said. "I don't think I do. What I would like to eliminate are the non-essentials."

"Haven't things changed for all of us since the affair of the brigands?" she inquired seriously, as if following his line of thought. "I've been trying to account for it. I've thought all sorts of things, and in the end I'm no wiser."

Then he said in his didactic way, as if he were talking for his own pleasure:

"Every person you add or subtract in a little group of people makes a difference. Your coming amongst us had made a difference to me—a great difference. And we

can hardly lay the blame at the door of the brigands. Those men were acting under the direction of highly skilled men who were far from them; and we were just tiny little pawns of no consequence at all. But in mixing us up with their affairs they disturbed our normal lives, and involved us so one with the other that we have no idea how to sort ourselves out again."

"More involved now than at the very beginning?" she questioned. "Oughtn't we, with the passage of time, to have sorted ourselves out and be no longer in each other's way?"

He played with the laces of his dusty shoes; for they were sitting down now.

"In each other's way? I hadn't thought of it like that. But the remark is good. Still it's only true of one of us. Yes—just one. I wonder if you understand that as well as I. Perhaps you have not enough background—perhaps you're for another purpose. It's rather curious to think what different purposes we all serve. You're the little candle that has lit up the scene and made it clear to me, but what you are to anyone else I've no means of knowing."

His voice had dropped so that it was almost as if he had been holding a conversation with an imaginary person, a figment of his imagination—not with the girl at his side. He stared straight ahead of him, lost in thought, abandoning her to her own devices without any compunction at all. In that profound peacefulness it was easy to let the minutes pass.

"The Promised Land," he remarked, so unexpectedly at length that she looked up, startled.

This time, however, no matter what he might be thinking, he was dealing with the visible world. His fingers pointed across the plain to the far north, where the

mountains smoothed away to gentle hills. The sun, now low down on the horizon behind them, was pouring light through some unseen valley on to these hills which seemed, through a trick of the eyes, to be a distant country suddenly brought near—a wonderful country full of marvellous things.

"It's almost like a mirage and exactly suits what Bunyan describes," he explained. "I found that out years ago. There must be valleys like corridors through those mountains—to let the setting sun through."

"I'm enjoying this so," she commented. "Can't we walk in this direction again tomorrow?"

The next afternoon they set out to explore the Great Wall where it ran sheer up the mountain-side. Kettling began telling something of its legendary history.

"Nobody is very sure of the facts," he remarked. "Obviously it was not built in a day. Some people think that the brickwork was put in nearly a thousand years after the original line was traced. But in any case it is a stupendous work, nearly two thousand miles long, and looped in many places; and the only man in the world who has walked from one end to the other is an American."

"Was it really of much use?" Gladys inquired.

"Certainly—so long as it was effectively guarded. Less than three centuries ago it held off a great force for a generation, and the only thing that caused it to be abandoned was a woman."

"A woman?" she echoed. "I'm so glad there's something romantic even though it led to defeat. Tell me about it."

He smiled at her, and before he commenced interjected an apostrophe:

"Like a woman to defend such doubtful conduct! What

a woman mostly does is to hold a man's arm—and make him miss his aim at the critical moment!" Then he went on in his most urbane manner: "Rebels had captured the Capital and taken the favourite of the general in command here—one of the famous characters in history. You know, they are weak about women, in a certain foolish way. Emperors have lost their thrones for them and regretted it ever afterwards. This commander, to free his beauty, made common cause with the host assaulting him, and the two forces marched side by side on the Capital. That is the origin of the Manchu dynasty; for they used this hazard to establish themselves on the soil of their enemy, and only surrendered the other day to a Republic."

"And the general who did this?"

"He joined their service, but he was not very happy and in the end was killed as a rebel. You might like to know his name—Wu San Kuei."

"Wu San Kuei," she repeated, "quite a pronounceable name."

An aged peasant had wandered near, and with utmost unconcern was squatting at their feet. At the sound of that name he glanced up.

"You speak of Wu San Kuei," he mumbled, in the vernacular. "He lies down there, buried very deep under the pine-trees." He pointed with a trembling hand.

"What are you talking about?" cried Kettling. "Buried here? He died a rebel far down in the South."

The old man shook his head.

"His bones were brought back—he was forgiven by the dynasty. He was buried where he had fought for many years. Deep down is he buried. I am ninety and when I was a child my father told me, learning it from his

father, so that the story has come to us from generation to generation. Once there was a monument, but now only the memory remains."

Kettling was greatly excited.

"If this is true, if it can be established, we have lighted on an extraordinary episode, a remarkably romantic theme," he said "But what a country—what a people! A vast literature, a vast history, and scarcely a word of the romantic themes."

Each day they made a little excursion by themselves, the others of their party being content to remain idle on the beach and enjoy themselves in the sea. Gladys learnt to know the scholar better every hour. He was extraordinarily intuitive; a little mad, perhaps, if judged by ordinary standards, but logical and just if his anger had not been aroused.

Still she began to feel a little lonely—to regret that there was no one but him here that she liked.

"It's curious Trent hasn't been over to see us," he said, after some days, almost as if he knew what was passing in her mind. "Perhaps there's a reason."

"There's a reason for everything," she rejoined. "But I'm sure he will come."

"Perhaps it would be better if you weren't so sure," he said smilingly, as if he were making fun of her, yet with an undercurrent of something else.

"I miss him," she said frankly. "We had some wonderful talks up there in the mountains. He told me what a horrible time he had in escaping from the bandits' camp—I have never heard a story like it. Fancy keeping it all to himself all these months."

"He's never told me a word," Kettling replied, almost grudgingly. "You're the favoured one."

"I suppose I am," she agreed. "Mr. Trent says it's because I know so little about things out here that makes it interesting to tell them."

Kettling looked at her guilelessly.

"There are plenty of people who know very little about things and nobody wants to talk to them."

At that she laughed, because she was a little flattered.

"What is it then?"

"Affinity," announced Kettling gravely, "the peculiar attraction between two atoms that makes them combine to form a compound."

"I'm part of a compound, am I? I don't feel like that at all. I feel very much myself."

"Youth," he replied. "That's youth bubbling up. Youth —the only thing in the world worth having, and the thing that slips from us."

He looked at her, wondering whether there was anything in her heart he knew nothing about. He looked at her approvingly, and then he looked at her regretfully, each current of thought inclining him to see her differently. But she was only thinking vaguely of the immense isolation in which they were living; thinking how pleasant it would be if they could be as united as they had been in the Capital. Trent was only ten miles across the bay. He had gone there straight by train the afternoon they had arrived, after a hurried good-bye, not leaving himself even time to go and see how they were being accommodated.

That had seemed a very abrupt ending to their wonderful days together.

IV

The first news came to General Wang merely as a rumour, something as intangible as the wind, yet like the wind capable of rising to immense violence and changing the aspect of the landscape. The Rat brought it to his chief, who was sitting quietly practising handwriting by an open window in his constant effort to make himself literate. Long stroke, short stroke, dot, dash; on he went serenely. Yet he was plunged in thought even as he wrote. All sorts of images passed before his mind. He was calculating, weighing, selecting, rejecting. Long stroke, short stroke, dot, dash—each had secret significance for him; they were the rhythm of what he was contriving—they were as the music of the spheres. The Rat, having peered through the crack of the half-open door, and judged from the expression on his general's face that an interruption would not bring a volley of oaths, stepped in, saluted, and then stood as still as a graven image.

Silence for some time—silence of the kind in Carlyle's apostrophe. But if great things were being fashioned, if they were full-formed, the hour had not yet come for them to emerge. Therefore his general, after completing a line, let drop three abrupt words:

"You may speak."

The Rat cleared his throat, and gave his information with soldierly brevity.

"Forty troop-trains have been ordered for this station

within ten days, it is said; they will be despatched in groups as fast as possible, but their destination is not known."

General Wang's head turned towards his orderly very slowly, as if he did not even wish him to see his expression until he had made sure what it should be. Then, suddenly, he showed his strong, ugly features and snapped out:

"Whose talk is this?"

The Rat made a deprecating gesture with one hand, as if to say that a man such as he could hardly be expected to trace to its source what was carried by the winds of heaven. Yet he added as by an after-thought what would have been irrelevant in any other country:

"The information is from the foreign department of the railway, it is said."

General Wang looked deeply offended because it was precisely what he had expected. Presently, to hide whatever he might be thinking, he remarked in a grumbling sort of way:

"That is as may be. But where do the troop-trains go; what is this story about trains being sent to take my army away?"

The Rat became flustered. He had never imagined that anyone would accept this startling information with such peculiar detachment. He had expected astonishment, stupefaction, not resignation.

"No one knows, your Honour," he remarked swiftly. "I came speedily to report because always has your Honour told me that speedy information is important. They are all greatly excited by the news. They have not thought to question why it should be. Who knows where the trains are going!"

His chief stared at him in a threatening way, as if this ignorance was a provocation. He stared at him; yet he looked through him, seeing beyond him all the things he was planning as if his soldiery were potters' clay.

"Fetch me that map," he said, pointing. He spread the chart on the table. "Here—" he exclaimed, putting his finger down where the Great Wall of China ran into the sea. "Precisely here and nowhere else. But you will not tell them—let them discover for themselves as they must discover soon enough."

The Rat had taken two steps forward. He peered at the plan, which he did not understand at all; its many colours, its black lines, and its red lines, confused him. He was amazed at the coolness of his commanding officer, at the knowledge he possessed—knowledge which he had so carefully concealed that he, the Rat, had had no hint of it.

"Do you understand?" growled his general. "Well, you can tell them that I have known about it for a month, but you are not to tell them that I showed you the map. It is accurate—quite, excepting one thing, the number of trains. But about that no one knows."

"Yes, your Honour," said the orderly, suitably impressed by the voice of authority. "I understand perfectly. Nothing is hidden from you."

General Wang was mollified. He relaxed his features, as if an important point had been gained.

"You will go to the station and mingle with the telegraph operators who often pick up quite valuable information in the day's work, so to speak. You will find out whether messages are more numerous than usual; whether any interrogations are coming from other camps; whether

cipher is being much used. Spend some money, but not too much. Report to me by midnight after the staff have left."

"Yes, your Honour."

The Rat withdrew highly pleased with himself. Now he smiled mysteriously as he walked along, not speaking to anyone. He had got just what he wanted; he began to wonder how much he could say he had spent.

Left to himself, General Wang did not put away his writing. He knew that officers from the staff would come soon enough, wanting to know what he thought of the rumour. They would agree obsequiously with everything he said—and meanwhile search below the surface to see exactly how he stood. How often had this happened in the years he had commanded troops! Faithful to his method in keeping in personal touch with every living soul whose destiny might cross his, he sat stony-faced until the last one had come and gone. Thereupon he locked the door—a European trick he had adopted years ago—and went into an inner room where the secretary in black was sitting attending to his duties.

He looked at him fixedly, as if he perceived a peril, and remarked:

"How many days is it since the two foreigners came and gave warning that war preparations were being secretly made?"

The secretary looked into a book in which were recorded all visits, together with all conversations.

"Twenty-six days have passed," he said. "The number mentioned was three hundred thousand men."

General Wang nodded and began calculating aloud.

"If it is true that mobilization is in ten days, then ten days more are needed for concentration. Then on the

tenth day of the action the crisis will come. It will be thirty days from today—one month."

The secretary handed him a calendar with his finger on the thirtieth day.

"The autumn equinox," said General Wang. "A good day indeed, a very good day for a victory. And after that comes colder weather which requires winter uniforms. And yet this time they will not be required—" He gave a short laugh. "It will be over before then. Are we not being mobilized to unite the country so that all jealousies may be buried? Yes—of course. The season has been well chosen. A great man is acting."

"Who is the great man?" asked the secretary, looking at him inquisitively.

"The great president, of course," answered General Wang grimly. "Will we not be called upon to obey his orders? The Mandates will be published, and then will come the order to attack all who oppose the consolidation of the Republic. Of course, it may be that someone behind is inspiring it all—that someone is even directing it—that someone else is ambitious; but how should we obedient generals know?"

Having indulged in this pleasantry, he withdrew without further words, and threw himself on a couch.

Now he recalled the warning Shardun and Kettling had come to give him. That had been a very hot day—he remembered how the great one-armed foreigner had sweated, his face purple from the heat. He himself had been excited; it was strange that foreigners should have acquired information which had been hidden from him. But it was ever so; they always heard things ahead, because it was always worth while for someone to inform them speedily.

They had been very anxious to know who could be planning the stroke. He had answered them with those formal, pointless remarks which form the façade of the intercourse between East and West—official talk, it is named. Was this not a legally constituted Republic where nothing could be done except in accordance with the law? The movement of troops was a serious undertaking, disruptive of trade and terrifying to peaceful men. Only the gravest considerations justified such a decisive step. No doubt the considerations in the present case were grave enough—otherwise nothing so calamitous would be attempted.

Kettling had smiled a little at this peroration, but he was a polite man and did no more than remark in reply that any one of the three or four generals behind the president was capable of having originated the plan. It was at this stage that Kettling let drop about the medals, giving out the information in a casual way because he had been long in the country and knew exactly how to talk.

When he heard the mystery of the head to be engraved on them, he, General Wang, iron-faced though he was, showed less confidence. He frowned and shifted his feet, and the flicker of a smile passed over Kettling's face. It was important, this; much more serious than he wished it to be.

"Who knows if that is true?" he exclaimed again and again, making as strong a defence as he could by remaining incredulous. Even after Kettling had produced the neat little lacquered box, with the golden blank inside, he affected scepticism. "Perhaps it is only an idea they have formed. These makers of medals are ignorant tradesmen. With our people there are always numerous plans. First one is tried, then another. Nothing is fixed, and

what is a medal? There is not one of our people who attaches importance to such a matter."

Thus had he spoken because he was greatly surprised. He had had no plan formed in his head and was at a disadvantage. He had desperately defended his ignorance with a stream of words.

And all the time the great one-armed man became redder and redder from the fury of the sun, growling under his breath and acting like an over-heated bear, finally getting up and going off with relief in his manner.

Was it really twenty-six days since these two had gone? Well, he had been so busy attending to this and that, planning every detail to meet the new menace, that the days had been eaten up.

He smiled as he thought of the way he had gone by train, disguised as an old man with a bent back and a white beard, to the very spot where the concentration would take place—to the vast rampart of brick and stone which ran into the sea two hundred miles from his camps. He had discovered that very simply. One inquiry had sufficed. This was the pivotal point, the key to the Capital, the key which everyone was always trying to steal. While these simple-minded foreigners had been concerned about winter uniforms and medals—and even desired to know the name of the general who was planning it all—he had settled on the only point of importance, the colour and inscription on the armlets which would be distributed. When he had discovered these matters, he knew the grouping of the armies as well as the proposed plan of campaign.

That is why he had gone personally to look at the great rampart of brick and stone. He had engraved on his

mind every aspect of the stout walled city, a veritable citadel, holding the rampart of brick and stone as firmly as a padlock holds a door.

He wanted the key to the padlock; he had his plan and not a living soul suspected it. He had taken every possible precaution; he had thought so far ahead that he was indifferent even regarding Shardun and his factories. They could go up in flames for all he cared, so long as his plan was realized.

He looked at his watch. He had a few hours to spare. He went in and whispered to the secretary in black, who smiled and nodded his head. Then he went to the door, unlocked it, and called loudly.

The guard had just been changed; a sergeant ran quickly in. General Wang addressed him in a rough, peremptory way.

"My secretary has an old gentleman here on important business. He is going out presently. He is to be passed out through the little gate and passed in again when he returns. I am not to be disturbed until I ring, for now I shall rest."

The sergeant saluted and withdrew. Whereupon General Wang was busy in one of the inner rooms for quite fifteen minutes. When that time had elapsed, an old man with horn spectacles, a white beard, and a neat little plum-coloured surcoat over a shabby dress emerged. The sergeant conducted him down a long bricked pathway through the grounds to a small gate which he opened. Forthwith the old man bowed, and with some muttered words passed out.

He hurried along not looking to the right or the left into the busiest street. Here there was a great movement of townspeople, mixed with soldiery. He did not go so

fast now; indeed he paused wherever there was a group gathered round a fortune-teller or a letter-writer, listening with his keen ears to the talk that passed. Twice he stopped to go into one of the crowded tea-shops and drink a cup of tea. The tea-shops were full of soldiers, talking to one another in loud voices.

The news had spread—they all knew that a crisis was pending. Troop-trains were to be assembled for them to be despatched to some unknown point. There was an air of bustle about; the soldiery were excited at the prospect of another war which would yield its quantum of loot even if some of them were killed and wounded. They made constant references to their general, and the little old man listened to these with a keen ear.

Presently, the little old man went into a better-class place and ordered a pewter pot of heated wine. There were officers scattered here, although it was hard for a layman to distinguish them since they were all dressed as civilians. They did not talk loud like the troops; many of them whispered, making it necessary for the old man to listen very acutely, while he nodded with his eyes closed as if from lack of sleep.

Disaffected—there was no question. They spoke bitterly; there were ominous hints in their conversation which caused him to frown behind his spectacles. These were not his own troops; these were the troops of the new division.

He passed out to the street. Now his manner was quite decided. He mounted a rattletrap rickshaw and told the man to take him to the station.

The station was outside the city gates; it was in a great open space flanked by prosperous places of business, and boasting smooth macadamized roads. There was

something alien about this spaciousness, something unexpected; as if it had not yet fitted into the teeming, disorderly, vociferous blue-clad world born to closeness and confusion, that endlessly issued out of the city gates, guffawing, cursing, bawling and spitting.

The little old man's manner was very sedate as he paid off the puller of his vehicle. He went into the station precincts and wandered up and down the broad platforms where many were standing, staring calmly into space as if awaiting the end of the world.

Presently he went into the building, and even asked at a ticket window the price of a ticket to the next station. Then he wandered along the corridors in an indifferent way, knowing exactly where he was going.

Here were the telegraph operators, with a resting-room immediately beside them.

He watched them tapping their instruments just as others were doing, even nodding to the young fellow nearest him with an admiring smile.

"Very busy you are, I see," he murmured.

"Not so busy as we were this morning," rejoined the young man, throwing a bundle of papers into a basket and carrying them off.

From the resting-room came laughter and much talk, and the little old man walked to one side where he could see through the door. The Rat was there, reclining on a bench with his tunic unbuttoned. There were pewter jugs on the table near him. He was giving them wine—he would pick up something which, sifted through, might yield a fact or two.

Without hesitation the little old man went up the grimy staircase to the station-master's office. No one challenged him, no one was interested in his movements. He walked

into an office where several clerks were sitting idly at desks. He pronounced a name. The clerks pointed to the door—exactly as he knew they would do.

He opened it and went in, closing it carefully behind him.

A tall, thin man was sitting there, idly reading a newspaper. He had no sooner caught a glimpse of the figure in front of him than he cast down the newspaper and sprang to his feet.

"Your Honour, why have you come?"

The little old man pulled off his dark glasses and looked at the station-master with his keen, quick eyes.

"Because I am anxious regarding every detail," he murmured. "It has come sooner than I expected. I was calculating for winter; here it is scarcely autumn and already it commences. You see, had I not prepared so carefully, my position would not be good. It is sooner on purpose—they are afraid of complications, of refusals to coöperate, so they hasten matters to take one by surprise. I have made no application for trains, and yet trains are assigned me—insufficient, too. We require twelve for the artillery, nine for the men and the guns, and three for the ammunition, and they must be moved first. The German has worked it out very carefully. Now this point is important. The line will be blocked directly the movement commences. It is important that that does not take place until my artillery and ammunition have passed. It is important that they arrive in time, before the other corps. You must block everything from the South directly the movement commences; if necessary a bridge must be destroyed."

They bent over a table, with several papers which the little old man had produced, in front of them.

The tall, thin man was very intelligent. He had been taken from General Wang's own transport command because of that. He understood perfectly that this was the key to some plan which had not yet been disclosed to him. But since he was loyal he would serve his patron faithfully even in ignorance.

"It shall be done as you say, your Honour," he ended, folding up the papers and putting them into his pocket.

The little old man went back exactly the same way he had come—through the small door into his own Yamên. Whereupon everything that was distinctive about him disappeared into a box, and General Wang emerged.

He went into the secretary's room. The secretary was reclining on a bed now, smoking a cigarette and reading a book, waiting for him to return. General Wang spoke quickly:

"Note that all instructions regarding troop movement were handed personally by me to the station-master today. Note that the German must be informed so that he can come tomorrow and report. Note that the ammunition will start in advance of the men for these points—" He read out a list of places. Then he went back to his own office and rang a bell, and said that as he had now rested he was ready to transact any business which required his attention.

V

TRENT, erect in a canoe, with a paddle in his hand, floated closer in-shore. The tide was running swiftly, and the light canoe moved on the lapping waters as if propelled by an unseen power.

"Do you want her, or shall I run her up on the beach?" he called.

Enid, lying in a black bathing-suit on the glistening sand, called back, after a perceptible pause:

"I'm not going to move yet awhile."

Forthwith Trent, with a few powerful strokes, drove the canoe into the shallows; then jumping out, pushed it along until it grounded on the beach, up which he dragged it until it was quite safe from floating away. Thereupon he walked up and down with his feet in the lapping water, enjoying the coolness and the refreshing peace of the hour.

But the figure on the beach was on his mind.

"I wouldn't lie in the sun too long, particularly as you haven't been in the water yet, Enid," he remarked. "This isn't Venice."

"What solicitude!" she exclaimed, turning over and resting her head on an arm to talk up to him. "You'd think I hadn't been in this country for years and years. What do you think the sun is going to do?"

"Give you headache," he replied laconically.

"I've got one already."

"Well, it will make it worse."

"Perhaps," she agreed, instinctively feeling her bathing-cap to see how hot the sun really was.

Trent stretched himself on the sand beside her and looked out at sea. An azure sky stood over the glistening ocean. A light breeze was blowing, just strong enough to drive along a fishing-junk, which, having come out from behind some black rocks, seemed for a moment to be pinned to a stumpy little steamer that was anchored waiting its turn to go to the coaling-wharves round the bend. White gulls circled overhead, sailing serenely in a poetry of motion. Had it not been for the figure in the black bathing-suit, it would have been a perfect day for him.

"Aren't you going to tell me what the trouble is?" he said at last, a little doubtfully.

"There isn't any trouble," she replied. "Can't I lie still and enjoy myself in my own way?"

"Of course," he rejoined, without a smile. "But you don't mean to tell me you are enjoying yourself. You've got something on your mind. I've noticed it ever since I came back."

"All the more reason to leave me alone until I get it out of my mind," she remarked, so smoothly that he had the dim feeling that she had scored a point.

He looked at the backs of his hands which had been burnt by the sun to a deep brown; and then he looked at her. He might as well be frank.

"I suppose it's that trip. Heaven only knows why you should worry about it. You can't expect a man to remain camped in one place indefinitely. I wanted you to come along but you wouldn't."

"That's true," she agreed.

"Well, then?"

"Nothing—there's not a word more as far as I'm concerned. I didn't want to go, but I didn't prevent you from doing what you wanted to do."

Again he had the feeling that she had scored a point, and again he reflected that argument was useless. Why should she have become suddenly jealous after all these years; were all women like that?

"I'm sorry I went myself if it makes you feel like that," he said aloud. "In any case it's over, and here we are all by ourselves."

"Very much so," she agreed, somehow making her third point.

There was indeed not a living soul in sight. Even the little line of red-roofed bungalows, built just below the red bluff, behind which was the coaling-harbour, were so lifeless as to seem deserted. In the opposite direction, all round the vast sweep of the bay, to where it terminated ten miles away in a frowning headland, there was the same solitude. And it was in this direction that Enid so often idly glanced—towards the headland on the horizon where the Great Wall ran into the sea. He knew she was looking there; he knew that she was thinking of how he had come back to her after that short but delightful trip up into the mountains; he knew that she was resentful, and nursing her resentment. . . .

He held his arms tightly round his knees, the sun scorching his wet bathing-suit to dryness. It seemed strange to him that after ten years a perfectly innocent thing should suddenly assume grave importance. What could he say, what could he do? The distant headland, that seemed so clear in the dazzling sunlight, had become forbidden territory just because Gladys was there.

"I'm going in," she said, suddenly getting up and splashing into the water. That was characteristic of her as well—that she should go off the moment she felt like it with a categorical announcement. He watched her strong, well-shaped body plunging through the shallows; then, as she passed over the edge of a sand-bank and struck out in deep water, he followed her.

She was swimming straight out to sea with a quick over-arm stroke. She was an admirable swimmer, he reflected, strong and confident, with no fear at all. The water was buoyant and full of salt that day; it was like swimming through a jewelled sea. His brown hands shot out in front of him, and on and on they speeded; soon they were far out—so far that they could feel the strong set of the tide towards the black rocks and the coaling-harbour.

Still she went on, as if she had no intention of stopping.

"We're out a long way," he said warningly. "We've got to get back, and there's the pull of the tide to be reckoned with."

She went over on her back and paddled easily.

"Do you think you could get me in all that distance if I said that I was tired?" she suggested, blowing bubbles.

"I don't know," he replied. "It's the best part of a mile. You're not serious, are you?"

For answer she laughed, and struck out again, rejoicing in her vigour.

"No, I'm not an old woman yet," she said, in her warm, husky voice. "I believe I could swim ten miles still if I had to."

She had changed to a side-stroke, gliding through the water as smoothly and as quickly as if she had fins. Never had he seen her swimming better than that day. On and

on she went, never pausing once until she grounded on the sunken sand-bank fifty yards from the beach. Now she stood up with a sigh of relief, and looked round at him.

"I feel better now. That headache is gone."

She pulled off her bathing-cap, and holding it in her hand made for the shore.

It seemed better after that, and he felt relieved. Perhaps she was still watchful, still resentful, but in any case she hid it better. Only once did she approach the subject uppermost in her thoughts, and then indirectly, as if to let him know her purpose and yet to preserve her point of view.

"Does Shardun's arrangement with Kettling still hold good?" she asked. "And if so how can he afford to let him idle so long?"

"It's for a year, I believe," he rejoined. "I suppose Kettling is like the rest of us and needs relaxation."

"How long was he to be here?"

"A fortnight."

She bit her lip as if that was distasteful to her. The headland on the horizon would lose its significance for her only when it did not stand as a sign of those she wished far away.

A few more days passed, days which seemed perfect because there was a hint of autumn in the air. The little summer settlement was as quiet as if the inhabitants had been marooned on an island. Trent and his wife swam, and the woman stared at the distant headland, and the man wondered how he might carry out his promise to go across and pay a visit. He could think of no way except going openly—and that seemed difficult to do. He reflected that it was as if he had disappeared through

a hole in the earth, although but ten miles of space separated him from his friends.

One afternoon, when he had gone to the little railway-station to see about some supplies, he met a red-faced engineer there who greeted him with great concern.

"There's something in the air," whispered the man of the iron track, taking him aside. "Four troop-trains through since this morning and a whole flock more on their heels—" He showed a mass of telegrams, and began counting aloud. "Six-eight-ten-eighteen, there's twenty-four specials notified already," he said, in an awe-struck voice. "It's a big show, mind you; they talk of a hundred thousand men coming."

"Anything in the newspapers?" said Trent gruffly, taking the roll the engineer had under his arm.

He searched through quickly. There was some fighting down South, hundreds of miles away, but nothing about these complications right at their back door. He remembered what Kettling and Shardun had said weeks ago as though it were something hard to connect with this.

"I'm thinking it's the struggle with the old man in Manchuria starting up again," said the Scottish engineer, "It was like this two years ago, last spring. Confound them with their wars; there'll soon be nothing left for folks like us. Who's this man they call 'Woopy' and what's his game?"

Trent stayed hours in the station watching the procession of troop-trains and the myriads of brown faces, looking out on the scene in a dumb ox-like way. The next day he came back, and now the Scottish engineer was tearing his hair out in company with a locomotive inspector.

"It's worse and worse," he explained. "It's up to sixty-four specials now, and they've as much idea of traffic as a drunken man. Two days more and we'll be fair blocked. They're holding all the locos, too."

By next day what he had said had come true. The line was hopelessly blocked. The vast sidings of the colliery company were invaded by endless lines of wagons containing men and guns waiting to go forward.

"Anyhow, some of them are coming back empty," explained the Scot. "We've finally got it into their heads that if they hold on to their trains and camp in them, the worst sort of confusion will follow. Watch this one, will you!" he exclaimed in stupefaction.

An immense train was slowly lumbering by with five locomotives coupled together, and regimental and company flags flaunting from the open wagons, on which tents had been rigged as though this were a migration of the peoples. Then bugles sounded—bugle after bugle took up a war-chant that broke harshly on the air, giving the scene a note of barbaric splendour. The sun, going down behind the ring of mountains that hemmed in the sea, glared fiercely like the eye of an implacable monster, colouring the landscape the colour of blood. Yet apart from this momentary bustle there was still profound quiet; the drama had not yet declared itself.

"They're being sent a few miles beyond the Great Wall," said the engineer. "There's miles upon miles of trenches being dug, and many of them are marching this way and that as if they weren't fixed in their minds. We're isolated already, not a mail-train, not a newspaper."

After this Trent went back and suggested to Enid that she had better think of packing and going.

"By steamer?" she asked. "Oh, no. The people who were here two years ago stayed through it all. We're miles from the railways and many more miles from the fighting. Besides, it will be moving away from us all the time."

"How about aeroplanes?" he said. "This time they'll be used."

"They won't try and hit us," she replied. "This isn't the front line."

"No," he agreed. "Kettling and the others are about on the front line. I wonder what old Kettling's doing about it all."

She did not answer; she left the problem of the frowning headland severely alone. But that very night who should turn up and ask them for a bed but Shardun, black with coal-dust.

"Took three days to get through on an ammunition-train—my own stuff," he explained in his rapid mumble as he stood on their verandah. "Nothing to eat except what I carried myself. This is the show Kettling and I were worrying about. Who would have thought that it was coming so soon? I'll get a boat or a fishing-junk or something tomorrow morning and get across the bay—the line's hopeless. The little general is somewhere a hundred miles behind in the jam. He gave me a flash and implored me to try and push through on one of his ammunition-trains. I wangled it with the foreign staff—at least I thought I did. Three days for a hundred and fifty miles; can you beat it? They've poured all the rolling-stock there is in China on to a single-track line and are mighty surprised that it cannot push through like a line of mule-carts on a hard winter road. You'll never teach them anything. Did you hear about those five trains all coupled together? That was the richest thing

I've ever seen. There were five colonels, each in command of a train. Not one of the five would give the right of way to the others, and they held up all traffic for a whole day, threatening to fire if favouritism were showed. Some genius solved it by coupling them all together and starting them on the fall of a flag. Four thousand men and one thousand animals in that caravan; the railway staff shrieked and ran into the fields. Some war this. Quiet as a grave in this little place. You wouldn't suspect such goings-on a few miles inland."

After dinner they continued to gossip about it half anxiously, half jokingly. The night was fine and starry and there was not the hint of stormy things. Enid, walking to the edge of the verandah, looked out across the great bay and saw the lights on the headland twinkling. On the edge of the black vault of heaven there was the vague silhouette of a junk, and somewhere in the far distance a steamer whistled. It was curious that on such a fine night there should be thunder. But there it was undoubtedly, far away to the north-west behind the mountains.

"Do you hear that thunder?" she called to the two men, who were still in their canvas deck-chairs, talking in undertones.

Shardun started up and came forward with a bound.

"Guns," he cried, after listening a few seconds. "Guns. Can't you hear the concussion, and the way it's spaced? Guns, light stuff in the hills about twenty miles off. I wish it were daylight so that I could get off."

Trent joined them.

"I'm coming, too," he said quietly.

"If you're going, so am I," cried Enid.

"That's good, keep me company," agreed Shardun. "But it's up at the crack of dawn and no delay."

VI

In the very early morning these three, met so unexpectedly, embarked on a tiny fishing-junk which had been enticed out of the coaling-harbour by Shardun's open-handed ways. They crossed the bay at a spanking pace, and landed in a little creek where other junks were huddled in alarm.

Quickly Shardun jumped ashore, talking incessantly.

"These people have the wind up. Look at the women and children; and the pots and pans. They know what's coming to them without a doubt. Where's Kettling and Miss Cunningham and all that party? What, that last villa with the flat roof? It looks like the turret of a battleship." He hastened ahead, in high spirits, swinging a kit-bag he had brought with him. "It can't be more than six o'clock. I bet they're all asleep. I never thought we'd get across at that pace. The wind was behind us. Now, here we are." He read the name painted artistically over the gate, *"Villa Vénus!* Only a Frenchman would have thought of that," he commented with a grin, turning to Enid. "Some name for a villa—what? The French have got fifty Annamites under an officer in garrison in a fort, I'm told, about a mile inland. Part of some treaty, it appears. Do you think I'll frighten them if I shout?" He took off his immense sun-helmet, and leaning up against the gate-post suddenly roared in a stentorian voice: "Kettling, rise from your silken couch and give us coffee."

A shutter was thrown hurriedly back, and then out

came Kettling, fantastically enough clad in the first things he had been able to find.

"My God, you gave me a start!" he exclaimed in his florid way, as Shardun came up the steps followed by Trent. "You two together make me think of a rescue-party. We were wondering what had happened to everyone." He stopped as he caught sight of Enid who had come into view in a very leisurely way.

"Good-morning," he said, in a changed manner. "I had no idea you had come over too. Let me get the servants and something for you to eat. Here's the table—we take all our meals out of doors."

The others began to appear; first, the elderly lady, Mrs. Hoskin, who painted; a doctor on leave from one of the hospitals; a Frenchwoman and a young man who might have been her son; and, finally, Gladys, with her head in a brightly coloured handkerchief and her bathing-suit on.

"Welcome to *Villa Vénus,*" she cried. "Fancy your all coming over together like this. Where did you spring from, Captain Shardun? We've been isolated for three whole days and began to feel abandoned. I've sent my aunt two wires already, but it's doubtful if they've got through."

"It seems pretty cheery to me," commented Shardun, with a cup of coffee in his hand. "Here's to *Vénus Villa* —some name."

"Isn't it amusing?" agreed Gladys. "It's our constant joke. All these villas have names of stars. Dr. Kettling made all the arrangements, and we were assigned Venus. We can see the planet right over there every night. Do you remember how you pointed it out to me months ago through that window in that awful little hut, Mrs. Trent?"

Enid turned ever so slightly. Her red lips, her pongee frock, contrasted sharply with her tanned arms and neck, and somehow conveyed the impression that, no matter what the hour, she would always be fully prepared. Now she looked squarely at Gladys—right into her eyes; it was the third time she had looked like that.

"I don't remember at all," she said, speaking very distinctly. "Your memory must be playing you a trick. It was someone else."

"But I remember quite distinctly," cried Gladys, with innocent enthusiasm. "You said, 'That's our star.' I thought of it the very moment I saw the name of the villa. It seemed such a funny coincidence. I'm quite sure."

"So am I," broke in Kettling suddenly. "Miss Cunningham told me about it at the time. There were only the three of you in that hut, and it couldn't have been Mrs. Briller."

Enid folded her hands on her lap and looked at Kettling with her eyes slightly narrowed.

"I didn't know you'd assumed the rôle of father confessor, in addition to all your other rôles," she said. "How interesting it must be!"

Gladys bent down as if busy tying her straw sandals. This was war, open warfare. It had come at last.

Kettling rose with a frown, and went ostentatiously round the table with the coffee-pot, offering to serve everyone.

"I'm going in for a swim," announced Gladys presently, as if nothing had happened. "Won't you all join us? We always swim at about half-past six. We can find things for you all to wear."

"I'll come," said Trent, who seemed very serious.

"I can't—I've got to talk to Kettling," said Shardun.

Enid walked to the edge of the verandah and then back to Mrs. Hoskin, who was pressing her to come, too.

"I couldn't possibly wear anything that hadn't been made for me. But I'll watch you," she rejoined.

Yet she did not leave the verandah as the others went down to the water.

Shardun had already buttonholed Kettling, and was rapidly sketching his plans.

"I've got to get into the town some time this morning. If you've got a map or a plan let me have it; this thing has taken me by surprise. I've got the hang of it more or less; the Great Wall running due south into the sea; the town, a sort of citadel, just under the mountains with the railway running through it; and then a vast undulating plain outside—Manchuria. But with a map of sorts I can plot it all out. I don't know what the little general has in his head, but on my life he bade me make his dump inside the city—there's six hundred tons of ammunition in that train. It will get through by tomorrow if I can find my way to the heart of the traffic people."

Kettling looked round. Enid was still sitting on the verandah railing, ostensibly watching the party in the water; but he was sure from the way she held her head that she was listening.

"I can't imagine what is going to occur," he rejoined. "I've been up twice to the town already, but there's astonishingly little to see. They've detrained a number of troops but not many; most of the trains go right forward to the trenches which are being dug along a fifteen-mile front a good distance out on the plain. You'll see it all clearly from the Wall when we go up."

Shardun got his glasses out of his kit-bag, and looked at something in the distance. Then he rejoined:

"If all the gossip I heard during the last three days in the train means anything, they're all sorts of things going to pop. My old factories are in a backwater; nobody's thinking about them. There are eighteen divisional commanders with their troops jammed together in the trains, and you can be sure there'll be fireworks—" He looked at the sparkling sea not a hundred feet away and watched the bathers. "I like this place. I might stay down here. When are you clearing out?"

Kettling threw up his chin.

"That's the problem. Some of them want to go now, and some of them want to remain. That artist lady, Mrs. Hoskin, wants some war-scenes, and the doctor wants to see the hospital arrangements."

"Suit yourself," rejoined Shardun. "There'll be no work for you until this show is over."

Enid looked across at them and broke into the conversation with no compunction at all.

"I thought you were only staying for a fortnight, and the fortnight's nearly up," she said.

Kettling drew a deep breath and looked at the ground; then after a pause he looked up squarely at her.

"I don't know," he answered in his precise way, as if he were trying to give a correct reply. "We were discussing it only yesterday, but would you believe me, I've completely forgotten what we decided. It is perfectly surprising the effect *Vénus Villa* has on the memory."

Shardun's blue eyes twinkled; he rubbed his chin. But these signs of amusement faded quickly enough.

For a slow, angry flush had come over Enid's face. She did not stand up or stamp her foot or rail; she sat stock-still and said in such a quiet way that Shardun could hardly believe his ears:

"You've been insolent to me before, and I've let it

pass; you've been insolent for years, but this time I hope you'll understand that I'm not going to let it pass."

Shardun sprang to his feet.

"I say, Enid, aren't you exaggerating?" he protested in his good-natured way. He went over to her and took her hand. "This all comes of getting up so early. Look here—don't fly off the handle like that for a trifle."

But to this appeal she sat silent—ominously silent.

"Leave it, leave it," said Kettling, in his most formal way. "I am quite prepared to be held accountable for all my words."

He walked down the steps as if he had not a care in the world, rubbing his hands briskly, and looking neither to the right nor the left.

The bathers had finished their dip and were approaching the beach.

"*Ave virgo gratiosa,*" he cried, as Gladys splashed out of the water. "Can you get ready in a hurry? Shardun wants us all to walk inland along the Great Wall to see what there is to see. Mrs. Hoskin—hurry, hurry."

There was a rush for the villa. In very few minutes they were all ready and began streaming off across the sand-dunes to the headland. Shardun and Trent and the doctor got far ahead; presently the others separated a little. Gladys purposely lingered behind and said rapidly to Kettling:

"Did anything happen whilst we were in the water? She's become like an ogress—such remarks!"

Kettling laughed as if she had said something amusing, and the sound of his laughter reached the three women ahead and made them glance back.

"She knows what I think of her—at least she knows," he said fervently.

But an anxious look had come on the girl's face.

"I don't want to ask you what you said," she murmured, "but this quarrel is a great pity and complicates things——"

Kettling shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you think so? Why should it complicate them? She's selfish and jealous. I can have no patience with her any more, none at all. She has no feeling for the finer things in life, none at all. She lied deliberately to you. I shall neither ask nor give quarter."

He walked up the steep incline frowning to himself, and opening and shutting his hands to relieve his nervousness.

The men were already absorbed in scanning the magnificent panorama spread before them. There was peace on this landscape—not a sign of war. A rolling plain, covered with grain; then, on one side, a tranquil sea; on the other, blue jagged mountains. But as Shardun swept the scene with his glasses he gave an exclamation.

"Cunning devils," he muttered. "They've sited their guns so well that it takes some hunting to find them. But do you see the remains of that big mud redoubt far out on the plain? And then those smaller redoubts? Guns there; then a long trench system. Looks like the pictures of Sebastopol in the Crimean War." He took a range-finder out of his pocket. "Seven thousand yards away. But the centre is much farther off—say ten thousand. See that flag?"

Trent, who had also been sweeping the sky-line, suddenly called out:

"I say, here they come—seven planes. They're following the coast-line."

There were excited cries as the planes became clearly

visible to the naked eye. They swept nearer and nearer until the droning of their engines sounded immediately above them.

"They're right over us. . . . No, they're not. . . . That's a half a mile away. . . ."

The fragments of their exclamations were almost lost in the noise of the engines. Then, in attack formation, the planes suddenly turned inland, their metal parts glistening in the sunshine.

They were over the town now. There was a series of dull explosions, and a great cloud of grey smoke. The planes turned slowly back.

"That's the station," cried Shardun. "Cheerful prospect for my ammunition-train. Now what are they trying to do?"

The pilots had evidently seen something that had aroused their keen interest. They circled round again, and came lower by a thousand feet. But suddenly they swerved off. A beautiful series of white powder-puffs burst in the air a few hundred feet below them.

"Archies—by God!" cried Shardun. "Did any of you know our side had anti-aircraft guns?"

He muttered under his breath as if someone had taken an unfair advantage of him; as if his professional standing had been impaired.

"Well, that's over for the time being. They've flown north-east by east," commented Trent, lowering his glasses and rubbing his eyes which were itching from the strain. He looked at his wife with a sudden, anxious look. She was standing apart and taking no share in the general conversation. "That was specially for your benefit, Shardun," he concluded, with a smile. "They won't do much harm if they fly at that height."

"And use that kind of bomb," added Shardun. "I'm going on. You ladies had better go back and keep to the safety zone. I don't think it's particularly healthy farther inland. Who's coming?"

They began discussing what they should do, and it resolved itself into all the men accompanying Shardun and the women going back.

The men marched off quickly enough, leaving the four women to find their way back alone. A few hundred yards farther on they came on an Annamite sentry in a khaki uniform, and a conical hat with a brass spike on it, posted behind an earthwork. He challenged them sharply in French and waved down to a camp among the trees, babbling the word *officier, officier.*

"Oh, forget it," said Shardun irritably. "No officer for us. We're going to keep along the Wall."

But when they came to a break in the great crumbling rampart nearer the city, before they knew what had happened a native cavalry patrol had ridden out of concealment and covered them with their carbines. There was a sharp exchange in the vernacular. They had left the international area, Kettling explained to Shardun who looked as if he would go on. This was a portion of the prospective battle-field. After twenty centuries the great rampart was about to be called upon again to play a warlike rôle.

"Well, let's get off it, then," said Shardun.

They walked down swiftly into the fields and pursued their way under its shadow. Ahead of them, with the smoke ascending from a great pack of troop-trains, lay the station, and beyond the station the city.

"I say," muttered Shardun to Trent, putting down his kit-bag for a moment as if he were tired and letting the

others get ahead. "A word in your ear before I forget it. Enid and Kettling had a sort of a quarrel while you were in the water. I don't know what's behind it. But it bodes no good. You had better try and fix it up before it goes any further. Enid was vowing all sorts of things."

Trent looked at him squarely.

"What was it about?"

"*Vénus Villa,*" said Shardun drily.

Trent looked back in the direction they had come from.

"It's been coming for some time," he said quietly. "Kettling will do anything I ask him to, but what's the good of asking him anything?"

Shardun picked up his kit-bag.

"I'd like to help you," he said, in his determined way, "but this is just one of those cases where only one person can help—and that's you."

"I'm going to wait before I do anything," said Trent, just as determinedly. "When one can't see one's way clearly, it is best to stand still and wait."

The four women, abandoned to their own devices, had gone back slowly. Enid avoided Gladys in a marked way, and talked confidentially to the French lady as if she were the only person in the world who interested her. She advanced so rapidly in her acquaintance that by the time they were near the beach she was inviting her to come over and stay with her. Mrs. Hoskin, who was carrying a sketch-book, occasionally stopped and made little vignettes of things that interested her, not appearing to notice the discord so near her.

The morning was superbly fine; now that the planes had vanished, peace and goodwill seemed ready to descend from the skies. Yet there was acute unhappiness in this

corner of the earth, and its area was being constantly enlarged.

"Look at the stream of refugees," cried Gladys, glad to find something to talk about. "I've been wondering what all those blue dots were ever since I caught sight of them."

An unending line of women and children, a few on donkeys but mostly hobbling painfully along, was pouring into this zone because in some mysterious way the presence of foreigners always meant protection. They came in little groups, without tears or flurry; silently, stoically, as countless as insects; escaping as best they could an impending doom. There were already thousands of them here in little mat shelters; the sea of heads and faces and blue-clad bodies seemed unending.

"Poor creatures," cried Gladys. "Can't we start a fund and begin with some food? Here's my contribution."

"And mine," said Mrs. Hoskin. "Mrs. Trent, won't you help, too?"

Enid had put her handkerchief to her nose.

"I'm sorry, of course, but they bring these things on by their callousness and disregard for their country. Why should we help?"

"Mais pourtant," said the Frenchwoman, giving something.

They found an old man and explained to him that they wanted to buy food; but now they shrank back appalled by the forests of hands and arms that were stretched towards them. Women with children at the breast, women with children clutching at their coats, women about to bear children were clamouring for help, a vast multitude indeed given up by the countryside by the threat of war as the sea gives up its dead.

The four women regained the villa in silence. Breakfast had been laid on the verandah, but nobody seemed inclined to eat. Out of one of the other houses on the tiny beach some trunks were being carried to a steam-launch that was moored very close in-shore.

"I wonder who that launch belongs to?" exclaimed Enid. "I think I'll go and see."

She marched off quickly and in a few minutes was back again.

"I'm so sorry to leave you all but I've found somebody I know, and I'm going to get back on the launch. I've just got time to scribble a note to my husband."

She sat on the steps of *Vénus Villa* and wrote what she had to say. Then she went with a wave of the hand, inconsequentially, with hardly a word, as if she were casting this out of her life.

VII

On the fourth day that General Wang and his troops had been halted by the terrible confusion on the railway, he took an important decision. Sending for the major who commanded his squadron of cavalry in a train near his own, he sat with him confidentially, showing him the plan of a walled city. He explained every detail, talking coaxingly as if it was something more than perfunctory obedience that he required, and hinting that the service to be rendered would be richly rewarded.

The officer was not at all pleased with the plan revealed to him, preferring to remain cooped up in a railway-train indefinitely rather than make a forced march. But he accepted the duty assigned him; saluted and withdrew. And forthwith in full view of his general, who sat peering out of his window, his squadron was detrained with all its impedimenta and marched away a hundred miles to the north to secure that certain positions should pass into no one else's hands.

Thereupon General Wang, his tunic unbuttoned again, and his feet no longer chafed by boots, satisfied that he had the situation well in hand, relapsed into contemplating the vast sidings which, usually encumbered with endless lines of coal wagons, were now given over to troop-trains. They never ceased arriving, these trains; they were full of horse, foot and guns, crammed with camels and carts,

bulging with grain and flour—an amazing and incredible array brought here by the decision of a madman who had emptied whole provinces into this bottle-neck in the hope of securing a blazing victory over a hated rival.

General Wang was comfortable—he had taken good care of that. On the day that his mobilization orders had arrived, he had marched his own brigade of bodyguards down to the station, where in collusion with the station-master he had detained the first Green Express that had arrived, turned the passengers out without any compunction at all, and threatened to shoot the train attendants if they proved obstructive. The seven foreign passengers who happened to be on the express were curtly informed that the exigencies of civil war necessitated this drastic action and that there was nothing they could do. However, to maintain his reputation as a large-minded, open-hearted, friendly man, who always befriended Westerners, General Wang ordered a second-class carriage to be placed at their disposal, with a supply of food sufficient to last them to their destination; and he had sent them on their way, if not rejoicing, at least feeling that they had been rescued from an unforeseen predicament by a strong-minded man.

Forthwith within the magnificence of the Green Express General Wang had installed himself with his inner circle of officers, together with a pistol company that performed the duties of a provost-marshal's guard, and as many machine-guns as could be crowded in with their detachments. To the telegraphic protests of the railway administration he returned lordly messages, declaring that such importuning would never deter him from carrying out what he had in mind, and that this train was necessary for him—just as were six others of minor magnificence he

stopped in the same summary fashion. And so in utter luxury he had travelled forward, his army scattered in trains around him.

"The old fox from Manchuria could catch us as safely as if we were in a deep hole," he had remarked again and again, looking out ironically when he became entangled in the traffic jam. "Whoever has this matter in hand could not have done worse."

The Rat had been ever so busy bringing him the cards of other corps commanders, camped in neighbouring trains, who desired to pay him their respects, his reputation having vastly grown since he had possessed himself of a provincial capital, and his divisional flag being easily recognizable as it flaunted above a flat car, with a guard around it, together with his personal flag with the six tigers.

"Indisposed, indisposed," he had grunted, each time the Rat had come with a card, looking out of the windows. "This is no time for visits. I will not receive."

He was well aware of the jealousies around him; well aware that the cool way he had acted in seizing a passenger train and turning out the passengers had even got into the newspapers. But he was quite indifferent to that; he knew that in all this vast throng there was not one who would dare to challenge him. They were all busy thinking about their own destinies; wondering when the guns began to play what cracks would be disclosed, and what treacheries revealed. The outposts were already in contact with one another somewhere beyond the blue mountains on the horizon-line where Manchuria lay. If the old fox could have only marched through the mountains and struck at this confused mass the victory would have been his, he thought——

When the news of the first air-raid filtered through, with exaggerated stories of the losses and with the mass of trains still wedged together, offering an easy mark, there was an immense effort to get away in which everyone except this small, resolute man participated. He cracked jokes and walked up and down smiling to himself; then with a scowl on his face he roughly ordered about the waiters in the dining-car, who, still clad in their neat white mess-jackets and blue trousers with green piping, looked utterly prostrated by having been so suddenly torn from the peaceful, profitable, parasitic existence of serving rich travellers to participate in this unexpected and brutal scene. Twice a day he had a banquet of foreign food, to which he alone invited his secretary in black who ate delicately and suspiciously, flourishing his right hand on which flashed the magnificent diamond belonging to the murdered governor which had been given him for faithful service. General Wang lived as in an idle dream, waiting for things to happen, waiting for the confusion to sort itself out; the elegant train stood motionless beneath a vast mountain of coal to which miserable blackened wretches crept as soon as night had fallen to steal as much as they could carry, the lounging soldiery silently watching them but never speaking a word, because this was foreigners' coal and foreigners were always rich.

There were all sorts of things to watch. Supply officers, judging the moment opportune to make good deficiences in the transport service which had arisen through their own peculations, scoured the country for men to take the place of missing ponies and mules. Every day strings of poor captives were marched in, roped together, silent, sorrowful, awe-struck. Driven along with curses by the soldiery, although they were blood of their

blood and flesh of their flesh; with splashes of the mud of their fields still adhering to their sober blue clothing, their clownish felt skull-caps set all awry from sheer panic, these victims of this nameless conflict were treated like cattle and fed with the same fare. Dumbly did they gaze over the high sides of the immense freight-cars into which they were loaded—these vaunted modern conveniences brought into the country by foreigners in the name of peace and happiness and prosperity and profits, yet which tore whole provinces to rags and emptied the countryside of its able-bodied men because corporations are soulless and governments no less bad. The captured peasantry understood no more what it was all about than the ponies and mules who stared at them from neighbouring trucks. Less valuable than these animals, because God dropped them from the women in far greater profusion than four-legged beasts could breed, even the killing of millions could not affect the balance of power.

And all the time General Wang nodded his head and watched and ate daily his two foreign meals, as befitted one who has found the formula of success and sedulously follows it.

On the seventh day a foreign railway official walked into his train, and called out his name in English.

"From Captain Shardun," he explained, placing a red-lined piece of paper on the table, and talking quickly.

General Wang nodded his head and sent for an interpreter. He could not understand a word, but Shardun's name was to him like a drum-beat and he knew that the message was important. So he ordered the dining-car attendants to bring bottles of whisky, and he clinked glasses with the railway official in what he had been taught to believe was the foreign way. Then the

interpreter translated and satisfaction shone from his eyes. Shardun informed him that the ammunition had got safely through. His plans were working; yes, they were working.

On the ninth day, without any warning, his train moved forward with infinite slowness and the mountain of coal had disappeared. Two hundred and sixty-four trains had passed ahead of him, he was informed; the line was gradually emptying.

He sat looking at the countryside, so rich with autumn crops, so bathed in sunlight, so peaceful. What a happy world, what a good world indeed for those who knew how to take it.

He did not often turn to his plans even in his thoughts; he was so secretive about what he was going to do that he almost trembled when it came to his mind. Everything had been prepared, and what remained would have to be done in a mad rush the way an assault is made—suddenly and frantically, all being staked on one throw of the dice. He knew that his life would not be worth an hour's purchase if the merest hint got abroad; he would be shot out of hand. All his pistol corps, all the machine-guns he had on his train would be insufficient to delay by one hour his death which would be demanded and approved of by all. He looked at the armlet of red and white which he was wearing like all the rest as a declaration that he adhered to this great crusade against the old fox in Manchuria. He did not even smile when he did that for fear that someone would see his smile.

His train only averaged thirty miles a day. At every crossing-station hours had to be expended in moving the endless mass of locomotives and wagons backwards and forwards to free the main line. Sometimes this led to

bitter disputes, shots being fired by the incensed soldiery, so great was the partisanship.

But on the eleventh day he ran clear of it all, straight into the station beside the Great Wall. The sound of the guns in the hills was clearly audible here, and a long procession of stretchers was slowly passing.

General Wang looked out of the window. Then he leaned against the side of the car, closing his eyes as if he were going to faint. His orderly, the Rat, standing ready to hand him his sword, looked amazed; had weakness and cowardice invaded this one because the battle was so near? Yet it was not the sight of the wounded, not the sound of the battle or the guns which affected him. It was the high crenellated city walls whereon must be played his final act which had affected him like a blast from a fiery furnace. He saw the hugeness of the odds; he knew that it must be victory or death.

Shardun saw him that evening. Shardun had not gone away after his mission had been completed; he had taken the place of the doctor from the hospitals, who, seeing that this was an admirable chance to study gunshot wounds, had transferred himself into the town and left his room at the seaside villa free.

"What's all this?" Shardun had inquired of the German in the artillery who looked after his trench-mortars. "You don't mean to tell me he's disposing all his artillery on the city wall. My mortars ought to go to the trenches."

"Orders," replied the German laconically.

"What's the game?"

"Just orders," the German had said. "Written orders, too. The artillery general has them."

Shardun had been disconcerted. The artillerymen

streamed up and down the ramps of the city wall in great numbers, carrying ammunition; they had even impressed hundreds of coolies to assist them in their work.

"I wanted him to try out my stuff properly on the front line," he had insisted. "I wanted to see what the gun-crews could do in actual practice. Now he's gone and put everything where it's no earthly good. You'll never teach them anything."

He had moved off, muttering to himself. But he had been unable to convince General Wang, who listened to his remarks with indifference, saying that the matter was not so easy as he thought and that his plan had been carefully prepared.

General Wang had taken up his residence in a Yamên which his squadron of cavalry, despatched so intelligently in advance of the mass of troops, had sequestrated for him. The Yamên was neither big nor magnificent; indeed it was rather miserable. Yet it suited his purpose well enough, and it was soon linked up by field-telephone with all his men.

A battle in the classic style had commenced on the great Manchurian plain, but it was many miles off. There was routine bombardment, small night attacks, and much machine-gun fire. Overhead sailed the aeroplanes, making their daily raids and flying so high, now that the pilots knew that they were liable to be shot down (which had never been dreamed of in any previous war), that any harm they might have done vanished. All along the front there was routine activity, and a little stream of wounded.

One night the enemy livened things up by launching a heavy assault which left a thousand corpses on the plain but achieved no other result. The great force, which had no less than eighteen divisional commanders, chuckled

and continued to intrigue. Then an unexpected thing happened. The enemy was reported far to the west, behind the great curtain of hills. He was said to be working far to the rear; and at that news a movement of dread ran through the whole army.

The action grew desperate again and continued desperate for days. This time there was fierce cannonading, unending rifle and machine-gun fire, and such close fighting that the tale of casualties mounted from trivial figures to thousands.

General Wang's force became engaged. Soon he had the whole of the division he had recently acquired in line in trenches two thousand yards beyond the city wall. But he kept his own brigade sedulously in reserve, and in spite of the demands of his commanders he let them have very little artillery.

Still this attack, in spite of the tempest of noise, failed. The main positions had not been carried. Nature had made them too strong. Again the enemy retired licking his wounds and leaving his dead dotting the plain, together with a number of prisoners, short men wearing hairy fur caps and armlets of yellow and black.

"This is only the beginning," insisted General Wang to Shardun, who stood on the city wall with him. "The attacks have not yet really commenced. I am doing what the others are doing—keeping everything of value in reserve. It is necessary to be very cautious."

Soon a whisper ran round the army that steamers had arrived which were going to carry twenty thousand fighting men fifty miles up the coast to the enemy's rear and utterly surprise him. The troops had already been embarked, it was said; there was an air of confidence abroad which made men look indifferently on the stream

of wounded coming back night and day from the firing-lines.

Then suddenly all changed. The transports had attempted to start—they had even gone twenty or thirty miles up the coast, when the enemy's aeroplanes had appeared and spread panic. Two ships had collided, and one had foundered, all on board being drowned. This time the aeroplanes had flown low, bombing steadily, knowing that there was no artillery to destroy them. They were manned by English; no, they were French, no, they were Russians—no one exactly knew except that the pilots were foreigners and that their aim was deadly. The transports fled back, crowded with dead and dying. And on top of that came the great attack.

It commenced in the middle of the night with a series of enormous explosions which were heard twenty miles away. They roared across space to the little cove where *Vénus Villa* was hidden away and woke up Gladys who listened with a beating heart; they rumbled across the ten miles of bay and caused Enid to spring to her feet; the flashes were seen on the sky by colliers far out at sea. Mines had been blown up all along the front; and under cover of the shock the infantry swarmed forward, supported by their artillery which by daylight was throwing shells right into the walled city and the station. All day the guns roared and the struggle went on, drawing nearer perceptibly.

Shardun, hurrying at daybreak to where the Great Wall ran into the sea, saw the first rays of the sun flash on the bayonets of the enemy massed far away on the beach behind great sand-dunes. They were less than three miles off, he calculated; they were waiting for the word to ad-

vance. He watched them all day, eating a piece of bread and never moving. But the word which they were waiting for never came, and before the sun had gone down in a blaze of glory behind the hills the bayonets had disappeared. The frontal attack had served its purpose and had kept every division on the *qui vive*. Meanwhile the enemy had torn a hole right through the hills ten miles from the sea, and had poured through in great force, endangering the whole line. It was said that they would have the coaling-port in their possession within two or three days; and then the eighteen divisions would be sewn up in a bag.

General Wang, ceaselessly striding up and down his Yamên and receiving reports, was greatly excited. He looked at his calendar. It was the tenth day of the action.

The crisis, which he always knew must arise, was there right in front of him. If they had turned their left wing it would not be long before they smashed the centre. His moment of action had come. He hardly listened to Shardun relating what he had seen; once or twice he lifted his eyes and looked at the blue-eyed, emphatic foreigner who had done so much for him as if he were a stranger, an utterly negligible stranger.

That evening he sent out soldiers who brought in numbers of frightened women. They were locked in all night with his secretary, working through the hours of darkness so that all should be ready for the hours of light.

VIII

After she had gone back, Enid's spirits had sensibly revived. The people she had been with on the launch had been so gay, and had treated their sudden dilemma from this political upheaval so lightly, that it was impossible to remain gloomy.

The launch had been met by some officials of the coaling-port who took the whole party to lunch and treated them royally, giving them the latest information and instilling in them optimism. A steamer was coming in a day or two, they declared, to evacuate all foreigners along the coast, as an attempt to get through a relief train had failed. There was considerable perturbation now lest a grave incident occurred. And a destroyer flotilla was also on the way. Although this clash had been so unforeseen that foreign Governments were admittedly surprised, they were doing their best to catch up with events.

"The old, old story—everybody caught napping," said Enid, in her quick way. "Still, I'm glad they've remembered our existence at last. Well, it hasn't been so terrible, although the uncertainty is always uncomfortable."

Nevertheless, in spite of this comforting news, she found her own servants in a panic-stricken mood. Stragglers from the armies had been seen; at night they would surely try and break in, the servants declared, in awe-struck voices. Standing in a compact group so that

they had the aspect of a delegation, they pressed her to give orders to pack, which she reluctantly consented to do, remembering that this was a people that it was necessary to humour in small things, their minds being always set on them and unable to perceive the larger issues.

She passed through a dozen fleeting moods in the course of the day, while trunks were brought out and innumerable baskets filled. She was forgiving, vindictive, indifferent, apprehensive, indignant. But her thoughts were not centred on one object; they fled from the issues round Gladys and Kettling to her husband. Perhaps she thought more of him than of anything else. Never before in all the years they had been married had he paid attention to any woman. Was he any different today? What could this young woman mean to him? Surely it was only the circumstances. And the unending crises. And the sense of insecurity.

She gazed across the great bay to the distant headland. She had done her very best to understand him. He was not difficult to live with, she reflected, although their tastes were dissimilar. Still that had never led them into open clashes. But he was too reserved—only once or twice had she penetrated beneath his serious aspect, when she had been surprised by his tenderness. Perhaps she had not tried hard enough to understand him; she suspected that she was too self-centred, if not too selfish. She compared him in her thoughts to other men she had known—to Tom Scott who had shot himself because he was weak, and whose memory had never quite vanished from her mind. He at least had been full of gaiety, a good companion, seeing the amusing side of life, until he had come to this country and failed to find the formula how to live here. She thought of the whole incident of

the revolver of ten years ago and the manner she had placed it within his reach, a vague half-formed thought prompting her to an action which had ended fatally. It had taken years for the foolish, ugly stories about his suicide to die down—and had it not been for Kettling they would have been utterly dead by now. She had actively hated Kettling since she had heard what he was still saying—what he had told this girl and her aunt. That she could never forgive.

Yet at the end of the day, when the fishing-junk at last grounded on the beach and Trent jumped out, it seemed to her as if her preoccupation had been a dream. She talked to her husband rapidly, with a manner she had only when she was genuinely pleased.

"Did you get my note? Ever so much has been happening here, and it's a good thing I came back. We're going to be evacuated, whether we like it or not. They actually seem alarmed about our safety. There seems to be an idea that something serious is going to happen. So I've packed."

He nodded as if it were wise to take precautions; and he, too, became talkative, as if he were glad that other things had passed from her mind.

"I've never seen a sight like that railway-station over there," he commented, dropping into a chair. "I'm glad I went. They've made a worse mess of this than anything I've seen before. It's just bedlam, with each army division doing as it pleases and snarling at the others. Our General Wang has dug himself in on the city wall and has a splendid position, but he isn't doing much fighting. The soldiery are not the easy-going ruffians they once were. We almost had an incident because we tried to go through some lines, although they all knew Shardun and

his mortars. That comes from foreigners mixing in their business and teaching them too many new things."

She met this in an understanding way.

"It certainly seems rougher than it used to be. I wonder how it all will end."

Trent looked out to sea.

"It's about time they sent warships," he remarked. "Gunboats are the only things they understand."

In the night she fell asleep, vaguely wondering how long they could take cover behind this subject. War—a splendidly neutral subject when everything else was selfish and personal. War, a rock, a refuge! She could see the gleam of distant star-shells through her shutters, and the musketry and machine-guns made an endless muttering far away on the horizon-line.

War, their rock, their refuge.

They awoke to the drone of aeroplanes as if no minute could now pass without some notice of this contest being pressed on their attention.

"Do you see how they always follow the coast-line?" remarked Trent, with his field-glasses to his eyes as he stood with her on the verandah and watched. "They're making a study of the wharves; something has leaked out. They say foreigners are communicating everything by wireless."

"That's cheerful," she remarked. "Is it the Japanese?"

That day and the next day were full of rumours. They could hear the bombardment in the hills much more clearly now. She was amazed that her husband did not suggest going over to *Vénus Villa*. Where were they: had Gladys and Kettling and the others left? Why was he so silent? Were they really face to face with a crisis?

Yet the coasting steamers continued to come and go as if life was just the same, as if this warfare was a mere incident, like drought and famine and incendiary fires which were so recurrent, which they never looked at too closely because safety lay in preserving aloofness.

"I managed to get the papers this morning," said Trent. "Nobody seems to be worrying much about what's going on, in spite of what the port officials told you. How about that special steamer? We certainly have cheerful governments."

He did not suggest that she should go off with all the numerous trunks and baskets which now stood ready, as others were doing in colliers; and because he did not do that she suspected that he did not speak for particular reasons.

Then one day Shardun turned up unexpectedly—as indeed he always did; as if rapid movement was his rock and refuge.

"You've saved our lives," she exclaimed enthusiastically, as he bounded on to their verandah and threw his hat on a table.

"I wish somebody would save mine," he growled discontentedly. Then he looked round at the peaceful prospect. "What's happened here? It looks like a deserted spot on the coast of South America—if it weren't for the wharves round the corner. What's happened?"

"Nothing at all—only it's getting on our nerves staying to see that the place isn't looted."

"Only that!" he rejoined. "Can't you lock it up and put in watchmen? I've got worse worries. It's getting on my nerves the way things are going with me—or rather the way they're not going. Fancy all that frantic labour I put in over my mortars and shells, and then to have them

stacked up like cargo waiting for a steamer when they can win the war. I got a railway man to lend me his trolley, just to get away from it all. I'm going back in an hour. Not that there's any need for it; only I'm on the jump. I wish you would see the sidings today. There are a hundred trains on them with all the locomotives pointed homewards. They're ready to run on the first excuse."

"It's always been like that," she remarked indifferently. "You didn't think your mortars were going to change things, did you? Are you going to remain until the end?"

"The end—what's the end? At least I've got a bed until they close up the villa. I say, you're not going to keep that quarrel up with Kettling, are you, Enid? Silly thing at a time like this."

"I've forgotten about it," she rejoined, although she knew she would never forget. "Won't you stay on here for a day or so?"

He shook his head.

"I must go back. You see, I can't believe that my stuff won't come in handy. I've talked myself hoarse through his blankety-blank interpreters, telling him how to get to work. Do you think I've made any progress? Not a yard, not an inch. Aren't we a cheerful crowd, sitting on the beach, wondering who's going to push us into the sea?"

That afternoon he drifted away again, and night fell and the lights twinkled on the headland across the bay, and she wondered once more about *Vénus Villa.*

The firing sounded very heavy that night; and the next morning it was known that the enemy had torn a hole through the hill defences and had come out on to the plain immediately behind the coaling-port.

Thereupon there was a panic among the population;

and every steamer in port put out and anchored where they were in no danger from capture.

Stragglers and slightly wounded men became more numerous. Trent went out for news; and she sat on the verandah waiting for him to return. When he came back he was so excited that he cried out:

"They say they've broken through everywhere and that the thing's pretty nearly over. Look here, I'm going over across the bay. I'm going to see how Kettling and Miss Cunningham and all the rest are faring and bring them out if they'll come. Our heavy sampan will do. What do you say? I can't get a launch in the whole harbour."

She rose to the occasion.

"I'll come. Certainly we ought to get them out if there's trouble. I'll not be more than ten minutes."

She began rapidly to prepare, getting her bathing-suit to put on underneath her dress so as to be ready for all emergencies. He happened to come into her bedroom just as she stood half naked.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, as he closed the door. The look on his face was somehow a caress to her. The thought remained with her and stirred her for hours and hours.

Presently they went down to the beach and pushed off the heavy sea-sampan which they had bought years before, and which they often used in their bathing.

A fresh September breeze was blowing, but it was still warm and pleasant; and the little sail they hoisted carried them smartly enough across the water, whilst they studied the shore-line and talked to one another and wondered what was taking place.

When they reached the creek under the headland they

found that every junk had disappeared. The sampan grounded in solitude, and Trent jumped ashore.

"Now, what are we going to do?" he said.

"I'm all right here," she replied, sitting on the gunwale; "go and see what's happening."

He hastened along the beach past the closed houses. *Vénus Villa* was open in exactly the way it had been when he was last there; but nobody was in. A servant told him that all the foreigners had gone off early in the morning, when the firing became heavy, to the French camp; there were all sorts of reports circulating. Thereupon Trent came back to his wife, and after a brief consultation they decided that she should wait on the beach and let him go and see for himself.

Upon that he went on, climbing straight up the sand-dunes. He wondered why it was so quiet. Not a shot sounded—it was as peaceful as if there had been no war at all. Once he looked back. His wife had disappeared from view. She was lying down, no doubt, to get a rest as they had been up since daybreak. The sampan, swinging peacefully, tied to a stake, was the safest place in the world. He hastened on in the direction of the French camp.

He reached it without encountering a soul; it was as if the whole world had gone under cover. Annamite sentries challenged him from behind a barbed-wire fence, but they allowed him to pass because he was a privileged white, and he went on quickly. The Annamite riflemen had pointed to the massive Wall which heaved up here like the side of a Gargantuan fortress. Silhouetted against the sky-line he saw other Annamite riflemen, their stiff brass-pointed hats flashing in the sun, and their eyes fixed on the vast plain outside. Then, a little distance off,

Gladys and Kettling and Mrs. Hoskin and several others he did not recognize.

He called from a great distance, and they all turned and waved back to him.

Now he scrambled up a path to the top, and gazed down on the Manchurian plain.

The firing had totally ceased, and great droves of soldiery were pouring down towards the sea, making splotches of grey against the yellow fields. A number of flags were planted in an irregular line, but what they were he could not make out.

He hastened on.

"Hullo—what's been happening at your end?" he called. "They're down within two miles of the sea at our place and everybody is fearfully alarmed, although nothing has so far happened. What's all this mean?"

He looked amazed as more and more men seemed to spring from the bowels of the earth to join the thousands who were streaming aimlessly towards the sea.

"Dr. Kettling knows more than anyone; he's been talking to fugitives," said Gladys excitedly, "and he's not sure he knows the truth. Did you just get over?"

"The truth!" exclaimed Kettling. "We'll never know that—Shardun may have some exact information but he's been gone for hours. We've been on this Wall since six o'clock. . . . The only thing we are absolutely sure of is that at daylight Shardun's trench-mortars came into action —he recognized them at once. It was one endless roll of short, sharp explosions like huge fire-crackers—there were over three hundred on the city wall. He insisted on us leaving the villa and coming up here. This countryman I've been talking to says all those flags flying there are Manchurian ones, black and yellow. The infantry have

poured out and left their trenches because a general has passed over to the other side."

The young French lieutenant in command of the camp came up and joined in the conversation.

"Une trahison," he remarked knowingly.

"Look at the flags all along the city wall. Look at them through the glasses," said Mrs. Hoskin, offering hers. "The lieutenant says they are black and yellow. Did you hear that tremendous outbreak of firing across the bay at about eight o'clock? That was apparently when the city went over. Look at the army now—enormous flocks of sheep without a shepherd."

It was true. Complete silence had fallen on the battlefield; there was not a shot—nothing but this restless movement of soldiery. Many approached the great earthen rampart above which fluttered the tricolour and called out hoarsely. Their numbers constantly increased; it was as if the whole earth was spewing up men—men who had now no purpose in life.

"This would make the most marvellous canvas in the world if I could only get it down," murmured Mrs. Hoskin, taking up a big drawing-book again, and seating herself on a boundary stone.

"I was going to offer to take everybody back," said Trent. "My wife's on the beach with our heavy sampan, but there's no sense in running away if it's all over. The trains will start in a day or two, and then we'll be back just where we were before."

An Annamite rifleman had come running up from below, and rapidly talked to his lieutenant, who became concerned.

"They are coming into our zone," he explained. "The sentries see them passing in numbers everywhere. But

what can I do with fifty men? I can only just hold the camp."

"Look at them pouring over the Wall down there," cried someone.

"This is the way it always happens—the trouble comes at the end," said Kettling lugubriously.

"I've got to get back to the beach if there's going to be trouble," said Trent anxiously.

"Look here, isn't that Captain Shardun coming along there on the Wall?" cried Gladys. "He'll know something, he'll know what to do——"

They hastened forward to meet him.

"Hullo, come to see the finish?" he exclaimed to Trent. "Well, I assure you it isn't pleasant. It's been hell down there—" he waved back towards the walled city. "It's our blooming General Wang who ratted at daybreak. Hoisted the enemy's black and yellow flags and opened fire with every gun he had on everybody in front of him—his own men, mind you, most of them. And it was my mortars that did the trick—two hundred and twenty of them he had in line, and he smashed everything in the trenches with H. E. so badly that the whole line caved in at once. Then he rounded up all the officers of that new division he had and shot them out of hand; he's been going on like a madman since daybreak. The interpreter was so dumbstruck that I had to drag it out of him with a rope—they're all frightened to death and don't seem to know how it all happened except that my mortars did the trick. You understand, *my* mortars. I suppose they're his as he's paid for them, but what the army must think about me!" He stood frowning, his pleasant, open face the picture of unhappiness.

"Exactly as I said," remarked the lieutenant, looking

over the plain. "Forty thousand men in nine miles of trenches; they could have held out indefinitely." He turned to Kettling and talked to him in French.

"The lieutenant wants to know if something can't be done to send a message back to General Wang to look after this zone," said Kettling. "They've started coming in here—and we're entitled to protection."

Shardun shook his head.

"Anybody can send any message they please, but as far as I'm concerned I'm through. I'm going to the beach."

Trent turned round.

"Ask the lieutenant if he can lend me a pony. I don't mind going if I can get there quickly, and you all will look after my wife."

It appeared that the lieutenant had a pony. He issued rapid orders to a rifleman who ran down the rampart; and they all followed him.

"Isn't this amazing?" whispered Gladys to Trent. "I can't believe it's all over. Is it true that it always ends like this?"

"More or less—I'm sorry for Shardun, after all his work. He was grumbling to us a day or two ago about his mortars not being used. General Wang was holding them for his own particular use. Now I'm off. It's about four miles. With luck I ought to get there and back in an hour."

A rifleman had run out with the pony which had been saddled and Trent cantered off. The rest of the party, excepting the French lady and the young man, bid good-bye to the lieutenant and started for the beach, talking about what they should do about getting away. There were small bodies of the disbanded soldiery about, but the men were tired and many were lying down under the

trees. No one molested them until they were in sight of their villa, when a couple of ruffians stood suddenly in their path.

The ladies shrank back, but Shardun walked on.

"Had enough of you," he muttered. "Get out of the road."

He cuffed one man into the fields and as the other stared at him with his mouth open he took him by the collar and threw him heavily.

"Come on, come on," he said over his shoulder. "I can eat these two up alive, but it won't be so easy if more of them turn up——"

The ladies hastened on. The two soldiers slunk away, throwing furious glances.

"We've done the wrong thing and I've only just realized it," Shardun said to Kettling, under his breath. "That comes of being tired. We ought to have left the women at the camp and fetched Enid ourselves. Now we're in for something. I wonder if we can't get back." He looked back and shook his head. "Too late—see that mob of soldiers coming through the trees? Our only chance is if they keep off our beach. It's fresh down here—it's the equinox, isn't it?"

The wind had started to blow in powerful gusts from the shore. The sea, lashed to great ripples which made the surface look corrugated, had a dark, iron look, while the air became full of flying sand.

Shardun stopped and tapped Kettling on the shoulder.

"Well, here we are. Now you run along and get Enid like a good fellow, and show her that you never meant to have a row. I'll go and get something started in the way of food."

Kettling drew a deep breath and made no reply. He looked at the sea; he looked at the villa; he looked back

at the great headland from which started the mighty Wall running two thousand miles into Asia. If there was one thing on earth which he did not wish to do it was this particular thing. But how could he avoid it—by what possible strategy? His pale, ascetic face became flushed as the nature of his dilemma pressed on him; he nervously fingered his tie. He must refuse; he must make any kind of excuse. But Shardun was already striding away; he was making a short cut through the sand to *Vénus Villa* to catch up the ladies.

"I would prefer not to," said Kettling violently. "See here, Shardun, can't you go?"

But the wind carried his voice away, and to run after Shardun seemed no way out.

Slowly he turned. He commenced walking along the beach in the direction of the creek, past the shuttered houses, past the little bathing-huts fashioned of native matting which had been abandoned by their owners so many days ago. A nice mission he had been given, a nice interview it would be! He remembered the last words she had spoken to him: "You've been insolent before, and I've let it pass, but this time I hope you understand I'm not going to." He insolent to her? That had more deeply offended his pride than anything any person had ever said—that and the way she had said it. He became hotly indignant. Shardun had no right to treat him so casually, and make a messenger of him in such circumstances although he employed him.

He stopped short and looked back.

They were all on the verandah now; they were sitting down to have something to eat after their long fast since early morning. There was nothing for him to do but to go on.

He walked, looking at the sea. He took off his hat

and let the wind blow his hair to disorder; it was good to feel that cooling breeze. Here was the last house and round the corner was the creek.

He took a deep breath and walked even more slowly than before.

Then he stopped short; it seemed to him that he had stopped breathing as well.

For the sampan, with a rope trailing in the water, had floated off from where it had been tied up, and was now coming down to the sea rapidly as the current caught it, and the wind increased. In the bottom of the sampan Enid was lying asleep on a red cushion, her straw hat covering her face, her dress, half open, showing a black bathing-suit.

The sampan bumped gently on a miniature sand-bar at the mouth of the creek; and then, assisted by the wind, glided over it. Now it was out of the channel and in the sea. As the current caught it moved more swiftly.

Kettling stood transfixed, his lips moving but no audible sound coming from them.

Slowly, steadily, irrevocably the sampan drifted away to where the bay opened up in an immense loop.

He thought of all the things that had happened during the ten years she had been in their lives—he thought of their inherent, unavoidable hostility, their incipient hatred; then this flame of hatred; and the native boat floating away with her in it became for him a symbol.

"I had no hand in it—take note, all powers of heaven and earth, that I have no hand in it," he called wildly. "I could shout, I could waken her, but I will have no hand in it. I abandon all to the powers of heaven and earth."

For ever so long he stood watching, hatless, speechless; and the sampan drifted on, growing smaller and smaller, drawn from him by the sirens of the sea.

He came to with a start, awakened from his fearful contemplation by a vague feeling of guilt. The wind was blowing more strongly now but the sea was not yet rough. Far away the sampan had drifted out into the bay where there was a powerful set of the current, which even on fair days left a dark patch. From where he was standing it was now no more than a speck.

He turned and went back slowly, horror-stricken by his own inhumanity, yet with a wild feeling of relief in his heart such as a fighter knows when his enemy has destroyed himself by an act of folly.

There were many people round *Vénus Villa* now. Of course Trent had galloped back—he had brought help. What would he say to him; how would he face him? But he had had no hand in it all; and, after all, he could find another boat and go after her. Then he thought of what he had himself so often said; how he had accused this woman of causing the suicide of Scott, the other husband. Here he was more guilty than she could have ever been. He would tell Trent the truth, exactly and precisely. He must hasten to him and let him find another boat.

He slowly became conscious that this crowd of soldiery sitting and lazing round the villa had nothing to do with anything but defeat; they were the fruit of the morning's drama. They had come with no purpose, but had found a purpose. Shardun had been recognized; every now and again they called discordantly for the one-armed foreigner, the cause of all their ills, whose guns from the city wall had undone them and killed so many. *"Sha-doon"* they called, pronouncing the name in the native way. *Sha-doon, Sha-doon,* they screamed ironically, and the way they did that filled Kettling with dismay.

He approached with quick steps now, talking in the

vernacular as he drew near, telling them that this place had nothing to do with them—that there were only women here. They only grinned at him, and mocked him, pointing to the villa and assuring him that they were going inside.

He tried to remain calm and self-possessed; even when one man threw a stone, he argued with him and begged them to go away.

"Better you go—for soon we will act," they cried derisively.

And saying which they lay on the sand, thick as crabs that had come out to sun themselves. Then a number of them set up a great shout and pointed: they had caught a glimpse of Shardun on the verandah.

Kettling, white and trembling and still protesting, forced his way through the throng and up the steps. The shutters had been closed, and he walked round crying to them to open to him.

At the end of the verandah Shardun's hand slipped out and he was pulled in.

"Man alive, where've you been all this time and what's happened to Enid, and what are we going to do with this damned crowd of ruffians?" Shardun muttered. "I thought you had taken my tip and gone straight up to the French camp with Enid—which wouldn't have been so bad a guess in all the circumstances."

Kettling gave a moan.

"The boat's drifted off—it had started drifting before I got there. I don't know what's happened. This part of the world is drifting too—we've all broken from our moorings, slipped away, going to be wrecked."

Shardun answered him fiercely.

"Don't be a fool. What do you mean? The sampan's

drifted off with Enid in it? Why can't you say it like a man? We're worse off than she is if these swine really mean business. Why're they shouting my name like that? I've never liked it less than today. What do they want of me? I've half a mind to be sporting and give myself up!" He laughed hoarsely and took hold of the shutter as if to throw it open.

Kettling seized his armless sleeve.

"Don't make things worse—" he protested, "keep out of sight, for God's sake. Another mood may come over them if we keep quiet——"

"If we've got to wait on their moods we're waiting on something pleasant," rejoined the other, unconvinced.

There was a roar outside which shaped itself to *Sha-doon, Sha-doon.*

"Nice, isn't it," muttered the owner of the name. "Wish I had one of my mortars here, I'd show them." He put his eye to a crack in the shutters and peered out. "I say, these swine are up to monkey-tricks. They've got a log of wood off the beach and are coming with it. What in hades are we going to do? Go across to the other side and watch there."

Through the door Gladys now came.

"See here," she whispered. "There's only one thing to be done—to get up on the roof while there's time. The stairs are on the back verandah—they're narrow and can easily be held. What has Dr. Kettling said about Mrs. Trent?"

"Good idea about the stairs," muttered Shardun. "But let me think a bit. Supposing they break in here, they can smoke us out—do all sorts of devilish tricks. About Enid—he says the sampan's floated off, which is about as lucky as being here, I should say. . . . Do you think they can set fire to us?"

"No, they can't," she whispered. "There's next to nothing to burn. All the floors are cement."

Sha-doon, Sha-doon, came a roar of voices.

"Yes, damn you, here I am right enough," muttered the man. "I guess we'll have to try the roof. If I go out I suppose they'll pull me to pieces. . . . It'll have to be the roof. Sorry about all this trouble. Now where's Mrs. Hoskin——"

Mrs. Hoskin was sitting quietly waiting in the semi-gloom of the shuttered back-room, working at a little sketch.

"That's great," exclaimed Shardun, in genuine admiration. "That's the stuff. Treat 'em with contempt. But we've got to get up. Listen to the dogs."

They were shouting his name and hurling stones at the shutters, first in small volleys, but soon in such quantities that there was a continuous rattling and crashing.

"They're working themselves up," he said. "Now, Kettling, you're the expert. Is it better to hang on here out of sight as long as we can, or make a dash for the roof where we will be safer but will be acknowledging that they've got us on the run?"

Kettling only looked at him in a piteous way, and did not answer. He was thinking of the sampan floating out to sea and he felt a horrible emotion well up within him. He wanted to shout out the truth, to tell them that he was a coward who had failed in his duty; but instead of speaking he stood leaning against the shutters as if listening to the cries.

"It's time to carry out Miss Cunningham's idea," he said suddenly. "They're going to smash in the place."

Mrs. Hoskin rose and closed her sketch-book.

"I'm ready. Gladys and I have got what we value in that bag."

"And I've got what I want," said Shardun, in a husky voice, "at least as long as my arm holds out. You had better get one, too, Kettling."

He had picked up one of the long flat iron bars for locking the shutters in a typhoon. Stealthily they moved out on to the back verandah.

"Just to the left there," cried Gladys, pointing to the narrow stairs.

"Up you go!" shouted Shardun in his stentorian voice.

There was a rush, a mad scramble, a great roar of voices. The soldiery saw them too late to stop them; but now they boldly swarmed into the bungalow below and began rifling the rooms. They tore from hand to hand everything they could find. They smashed to atoms every pane of glass; they hurled the furniture out on to the sand insanely, childishly, madly, foolishly. And when this first spasm of rage was over they laughed with shrill, demoniacal glee.

On the flat roof the four heard it with tightening lips.

"Sit down under cover of the parapet," ordered Shardun. He had taken off his coat, and stood in his shorts and shirt, grasping the typhoon-bar. "If they only come one at a time I'll click them off so fast they won't know what's happened to them. Some breeze up here—" He shivered as the wind whistled over the roof, increasing in violence every moment.

It took longer than they thought for anything to happen. But at last when there was nothing left to wreck below; when they had surfeited themselves with wanton destruction, somebody thought of it and a hail of stones came. Bouncing, richochetting, hurtling through the air, the roof was raked as by a hail-storm. Lying under the parapet, with their heads covered, the two women were

safe, but Kettling was struck and sank to his knees with a groan. Shardun, bent almost double at the head of the staircase, never turned or moved.

Gradually the hail ceased, and only the wind tore over the building with an unending moaning. Gladys, glancing up apprehensively, saw Shardun spring to his feet; then she heard his hoarse, savage cry. The iron bar lashed out like a whip at a head and shoulders that had risen out of the void; there was a shrill, frantic scream. Again and again the iron bar lashed, and each time there was a scream of a kind she had never heard before.

Then silence on the staircase, although a frantic, unending roar came from below.

Shardun was leaning panting against the parapet. He turned and threw the two women a glance.

"I've bumped off a couple, I believe—cut through one fellow's head like cheese. Give them something to think about. The swine have found that they can get up two at a time. I don't know how long I can keep this up. Here they come."

He sprang to one side as a pole was pushed at him. Two or three men stabbed at him with it, gradually driving him back. Kettling was on his knees, the blood trickling down one side of his face, staring as if hypnotized. The soldiers had a foothold on the roof and were advancing victoriously, when with a fierce cry Shardun hurled the iron bar at them with a mighty effort and leaped at them.

Gladys covered her face with her hands, and then drew them away again.

Above the storm, a tempest of screams, shouts, gasps and groans—unearthly sounds as if men had become animals. She had never conceived that such blows could be

given and taken. Once Shardun was beaten to his knees and almost overwhelmed—there was a medley of twisting bodies, gleaming eye-balls, desperate hands.

Then, with his gigantic strength, he had broken free again, and his single arm slashed like a flail. Out of the medley only one man remained crouching on the ground, hanging his head between his arms, dripping with blood. Without hesitation, without pity, Shardun sprang on him like a panther, and with a hideous oath stamped on him again and again with his great feet until he lay a limp bundle of flesh. Then, grasping him like a sack, he dragged him to the parapet and slung him headlong over to the ground beneath.

He turned dizzily and came towards the two women panting, and swaying from side to side.

"Couldn't be helped—only thing they understand. I'd got to savage him. They nearly did me in—Christ, what a fight!"

He licked his lips which were dripping with blood and pulled at his shirt which hung in shreds. His great, hairy chest and the smooth stump of his amputated arm, on which was the remains of a tattooed flag, made him a hero, a flaming unreality on that flat roof, in that howling wind.

"If they come back they've got me for cold meat," he muttered brutally. He reeled to and fro. "Isn't that a bugle? By God, they're the bugles!" He hung over the parapet. "They're calling them off, by God, they are!"

He sank on his knees as if his strength had oozed away.

"They're calling them off," he whispered.

IX

Trent galloped along the road, thinking, in his single-hearted way, of nothing but the particular object in view.

The road wound like a snake through tall crops which shut him in, through a countryside as deserted as if it had been visited by the plague, through hamlets as silent as the grave.

The pony was old and soon tired; and the rider had to exert his utmost strength to drive him in the teeth of a wind that made the willows and the birch-trees lining the road moan and whistle in a weird and uncanny way, and lifted the dust in great blinding clouds. Once he was only saved from falling into a miniature crater, made by a shell, by his pony violently shying off into the fields; but he drew bridle only long enough to recover his seat.

At last the tall brick chimneys in the station yards rose before him. He rode round interminable walls of grey stone until he found a gap through which he clattered up to tracks which were blocked with wagons.

Now he dismounted and led his foundered pony by the bridle so as not to trip over the signal wires.

Débris was flung everywhere. There were unparalleled masses of abandoned equipment, torn uniforms, an endless track of native shoes, rifles, heaps of firewood, sacks of flour.

All round soldiery were lying on the ground, ominously silent. In their midst, disdained by them, were dead bodies. The soldiery never moved when they saw the

white man; they never even talked. Only their eyes followed him until he had passed out of sight, when they let their heads fall wearily and contemplated the earth.

Around these men he saw that machine-gun companies were posted; and a little farther on a large group of cavalry.

He went quickly towards the crenellated city wall, on which he could see the black and yellow flags which had been the enemy's colours.

There were guns here; and many of Shardun's mortars. At the city gate a party of Manchurian cavalry, with shaggy fur caps on their heads and black and yellow bands on their arms, stood with a large white flag hung on a bamboo pole. They talked to one another endlessly, and as they saw him come on his sweating pony one of them broke into senseless laughter.

Even here he was allowed to pass unchallenged, and so up the dusty main street he went to the Yamên.

At the gateway were more of the men with shaggy fur caps. The Yamên was completely surrounded by machine-guns, the gunners sitting in groups on the ground round their guns, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

"Who are you?" he was rudely asked; and when he rejoined, "One who is a friend of your general's and who comes to speak with him," he was allowed to pass in.

Standing at the doorway was the Rat. He recognized him at once, and gave a gasp of surprise as if he were the last person in the world he expected to see.

"You have côme, how have you come?" he burst out in his coarse vernacular. "Our general will be pleased to see you. Yes, he will be pleased. Just now they are busy discussing." He lowered his voice as if this were very confidential. "It is all arranged. There are to be

six articles; then a joint proclamation. But this city remains in our possession. Only we shall give free passage to their trains and for one year there must be absolute peace." He talked on fluently, absorbed as all his people are in what they know, oblivious to everything else; as if their knowledge were an evangel sufficient for the whole world.

Trent listened and fidgetted.

"Will they be through soon?" he said. "It is urgent for me to see the general now. The soldiers are pouring in down there near the sea among the foreigners. We need protection. Already it is nearly an hour since I left. Trouble may arise."

The Rat laughed.

"Trouble! It is impossible. Their spirit is broken, they have no fighting power. All have been disarmed—not a single man but has gone off without his weapon. Our general saw to that. Trouble is impossible."

Trent looked at his watch.

"It is urgent," he insisted.

"At once, at once," replied the Rat, trying to appease him. "They are even now signing. The copies have been made. I spoke to the secretary just now. Certainly it will not be long. But if I go in and interrupt, there will be delay. Besides, our general cannot dismiss the emissaries until he has completed the agreement, since he invited them to come. This is also the safety of our troops who have now the enmity of all these others behind and around us."

He waved his hand back towards the bottle-neck where for so many days that mass of trains had been wedged; and out of which they all had issued only to be trapped by this fate.

"We have ladies; there is alarm," insisted Trent, for the last time.

The Rat walked a step or two; bent down and looked through a crack.

"Even now they are finishing," he whispered back. "As soon as they have been ushered out I will announce you. Here, you see——"

The delegates had filed out into the passage-way. There were bows, salutes. They walked off whispering to one another and peering about to see if their escort was ready, so absorbed that they did not even see the white man.

The Rat, with a loud announcement, opened the door.

General Wang was carefully folding up the paper that had just been signed.

"You—" he cried in genuine astonishment, as he saw his visitor. "How did you come at such a moment?"

"To seek your help— This matter is very urgent. We need protection at the seashore. The soldiers from the trenches are pouring down on us. A troop of cavalry will save much trouble."

General Wang threw back his hand and gave a loud laugh.

"My cavalry, where is it? Barely enough horsemen now for messengers. I tell you, no cavalry is a weakness. Until the delegates have been escorted back there is not a man. But to draw off these marauding dogs is easy and does not require soldiers on horses. There are telephone-posts near the sea, not more than a mile or two away. All are now in my hands. Buglers will be sent to draw them off." He called, and a lieutenant came in through a side-door. General Wang put his hands behind his back, and talked peremptorily. "All the telephone-posts to be notified at once to send down patrols to

the sea with buglers to call back all soldiers who have proceeded to forbidden territory among the foreigners. It must be done quicker than a horse, and report." The lieutenant saluted and hurried out. "There, the matter has no importance. They have no fighting spirit left—none at all. They would hurt nobody, least of all you foreigners. Why should they hurt you? Am I not the master now here?" He brought down his fist on the table and his face acquired a scowling expression. "That we showed this morning when we stopped this war which was vainly sacrificing the people. With every gun I opened fire as my declaration of policy circulated last night announced I would do; and we hoisted the new flag to show that even though this army no longer fights, I remain the commander of the barrier town—allied to the neighbouring Manchurian forces. It is in the six articles, the first article. Thus by little bloodshed have I stopped great bloodshed; by quick action have I struck down wild ambitions; by patient planning in advance, each point has been carefully attended to so that there was no confusion—only quick submission to what was inevitable." He stopped and looked up as if expecting admiration, congratulations, expressions of delight. But because Trent stood silent, he went on grimly and defiantly. "And the unjust have been punished. Those who conspired against me in the provincial capital less than three months lie there—behind the Yamên, everyone of them. Yes, you will find them there, lying on their faces and their backs. They will conspire no more against one who treated them kindly, who saw to it that even their arrears of pay were given them, and yet whom they tried to ruin by frightening and rousing the population with stories of ghosts——"

He was walking up and down the room now; he was boastful, ferocious, challenging, indifferent to everything but his own thought which burned in him like a fever.

Suddenly he stopped and faced this man whom once he had served in a humble capacity and to whom he had been talking as if his bloody epic must fill the world.

"Am I right or not?" he asked, almost anxiously. "Will my action seem right to Western peoples? All night women worked in this room making flags and armlets so that we should be ready this morning. My action was dictated by humanity—nothing but humanity."

Trent looked at him steadily.

"Western peoples cannot understand the actions of Eastern peoples—they are outside their lives just as their thought is outside. They note and watch and reflect, and if they are not harmed they let it pass."

At that a dark shadow passed over the other's face as when a cloud blots out the sunlight. He walked away, holding his head very stiffly and staring at the wall.

"I understand. You will not take sides, you will not make friends with this man or that. For Western peoples all of us are equal, all the same. Am I the same?" He turned, struck his chest violently, and became purple in the face, shouting his next words. "I dare; I think; I strike. The same! Really a foolish conception leading to trouble, helping the foolish as much as those who dare, who think, who strike. To use force, to use military strength at the right moment, is it the same as to lie idle on the *K'ang* with women, to smoke the drug, to hoard up silver, to cheat with words? You do not answer—you cannot answer. When I was sixteen I knew the difference. When I was twenty I let ambition ride me, not for women or the drug or silver but for power. Yes,

power. Each opportunity I seized and turned to my advantage. I had no teachers except my foreign friends, and what they taught they did not know they taught, for it was the secret lessons that I took which helped—lessons in action, quickness, new things, harshness, details. . . . And we are all the same. . . . Ha-ha-ha! Truly laughable, most laughable." He laughed boisterously, showing his white teeth; and then he stopped as suddenly as he had commenced, peering at his visitor's face as if he sought something which was not there.

"We have our own way of thinking," said Trent. "What has taken place this morning is impossible with us. Formerly perhaps, many hundreds of years ago, but never now."

General Wang struck his chest violently again.

"I know what you will not clearly say—that I have been guilty by turning to the enemy in the middle of the battle. Guilty, am I guilty, I who am not afraid to die? If I had not turned what would have happened afterwards?" He came slowly like a wrestler who is about to spring until he stood directly over Trent. "I will tell you. My provincial city would have been taken from me because my strength to resist would have been wasted, and the fool who ordered all this, with his winter uniforms and his medals which bear his portrait, would have laughed at me and treated me like a beaten one. My city would have been taken, I say, and my guns and my factories distributed among his friends. All this have I avoided. Now I am master, master of them all—master of this barrier city, master of the mass of men because I stand in the middle and hold the key—" He stood there vaingloriously, watching to see the effect of that and noting that now there was no reply.

Unexpectedly there was a knock, a quick, sharp knock on the door.

Like a flash the expression on his face changed, and he advanced with short steps to the entrance.

The lieutenant who had been sent with the message was standing there. He saluted and said very formally:

"Orders by telephone, having been transmitted as ordered by Your Excellency, the posts have telephoned back that patrols with buglers have started from six points."

General Wang stood with a hand on the buttons of his tunic.

"Good! As soon as they return, each post to telephone an exact account. Go——"

The lieutenant withdrew.

"You see," he continued, looking at Trent with a contented smile, and shaking his head up and down. "It was managed rapidly enough, eh, the way you foreigners do?" He walked up to a plan on a table and bent over it. "In forty minutes we will receive the additional reports. In an hour all the men will be drawn off. Is that fast?"

Trent rose.

"Yes—very excellent indeed. I have to thank you indeed for troubling about such a matter when so many things occupy you. I am very thankful."

He advanced, holding out his hand.

"No, no," cried the other. "You cannot go now. I have much to say. We meet so seldom. I have barely commenced to talk and now you wish to bid farewell. Take seat again."

"I must go," said Trent firmly. "My wife was there in the boat we came over in. The others were anxious. All await my return."

General Wang walked away from him, his hands behind his back.

"Impossible, impossible, after so short a visit," he insisted. "Has not what you asked for been done more speedily than foreigners could do it? If I had refused, if I had said it was impossible; or if I had agreed and done nothing as these others who command troops do?" He waved a hand to embrace the countryside. "And if you return what can you do?" He looked at him quizzically as if this last argument was unanswerable, his strong, ugly face wrinkled in a smile.

"I can explain how fortunate we have been——"

"You are too complimentary. Leave that aside. I am hungry. Let us eat. After we have eaten you can go. I have not eaten since yesterday." He called loudly. Trays piled with food were brought in by soldiers, who set them down with a noisy clatter and filed out. "Sit down, sit down. This is but coarse camp food, but it is the best we have and there is something of everything."

"I must go," said Trent doggedly.

"It is too soon. I wish to discuss another matter with you. I can repay my foreign friends for all their help by sending you back to your homes in comfort. The express train I took away is still here—you shall have it. Do not think because I have talked so much of myself that I have forgotten you. To each one of you I am indebted. *Sha-doon,* although he did not know the nature of things this morning, will soon know how great a part he played with his guns. This morning he was angry, displeased because of the secrecy I have observed. Yet why should he be angry? If you could only have seen the fire of his guns . . . devastating, crushing. . . . They swept the trenches from the city wall; they fired ten

thousand shells in one hour. I would like to examine the ground with *Sha-doon;* we must see how the dead lie and whether the trenches were blown in. You will speak to him of this when you meet; he went this morning very suddenly." He paused and moved his head up and down reflectively. "That train I speak of is an express of the same kind as the one that was robbed so many months ago. Do you remember? I will send with it the funds I am to receive for my action this morning. They will arrive from the Manchurian forces tonight. It is the fourth article. You agree?"

"I can return later to discuss this all; now I must go," said Trent.

General Wang put his arms behind his back, and placed himself before the door.

"You cannot go—you understand? It is dangerous, highly dangerous. My action is not yet complete. You may not pass through the station. You saw the soldiery seated there on the tracks? They are to die—every one of them. Yes. Do not argue. This is the brigade that returned my fire—they shot my gunners from the train-tops. They are to die, I tell you. How can you leave when in a short time the machine-guns commence? Let us eat—be seated. Even if you attempt to pass you will be stopped—" He pointed to a chair, but Trent only looked at him and said bitterly:

"You eat at the moment of killing?"

General Wang had seated himself. He picked up a bowl of soup which he emptied at a gulp, setting it down defiantly.

"Yes, I eat. Men eat on a battle-field, do they not? Why do they eat if their brothers are dying, if they are killing others? They eat because food is life, because it

is also the struggle. Your argument passes me by." He stopped and listened intently. "I thought it had commenced but it was the wind. What a wind—roaring down from the mountains! You see, you cannot leave. The Yamên is surrounded by machine-guns, the positions were taken up when the delegates left. Until I give the orders no one can leave or enter—" He lifted a bowl of macaroni and ravenously devoured it. "If you will not eat, I will eat, even though I am not treating you as an honoured guest. Twenty hours without food and forty without sleep—a long piece of work. If I had to die in one minute, yet would I eat. Ah——"

He threw down a porcelain spoon he had in his hand, and with a rapid step went across the room and stood by the broken paper window through which the wind sighed and hissed. The sound of men moving about on the brick floors of the corridors outside had stopped. Every whisper had stopped. There was only the moaning and hissing of the wind. But now through it—piercing it from time to time as a knife pierces something soft—came the clacking of machine-guns. And on top of the first clacking yet other clacking, and still other clacking, each layer of sound overlaying and mixing with the next until it was insistent, ominous, all-pervading, hideous because its import had been made plain.

The massacre had commenced.

Trent, a prisoner in the room, listened to this morbid climax which made movement as impossible as speech. There was pain and anguish on his face, and his heart suddenly became leaden. He remembered his own words as if they had been spoken in some distant past by some one else: "Western peoples cannot understand Eastern peoples. . . . They are outside their lives. . . . They note

and watch and reflect; and if they are not harmed they let it pass. . . ."

Outside their lives, beyond comprehension, an enigma, a sphinx, although these were men of sober appearance and honest when unstirred by passion. . . .

Right through the storm the sound of firing cut. It rose in acid bursts; it died down; it rose again. But at last it had vanished entirely; and on the brick floors of the corridors feet moved again, and there were once more those sibilant, curious whispers.

General Wang left the window and came back to his seat. He was pale now and his eyes were filled with a mysterious light. He moved his shoulders as if some strange pain had crept into them, and he did not look at Trent.

He took up a bowl and watched his hand as if fascinated by the fingers, which were stiff and unresponsive. Very little did he eat—very little indeed, as if the food had lost its taste. Yet when he spoke his voice was calm. And as by a miracle he threw back to this Westerner the thought which he himself had been thinking because it was the only one which united them.

"Western peoples cannot understand Eastern peoples; you have said it, you who have lived amongst us for long years. Power was placed in my hand because I have been able to seize it; and if it were plucked from my hand I would die." He looked towards the window in a mysterious way as if he could see through it, see everything in this corner of the world which he had crushed under his heel, see the evilness which would rise against him if he weakened. "Sixteen hundred men there were. They were shot against the railway wagons from which they fired

on my gunners; they were shot by machine-guns because they used machine-guns for their shooting. Have you anything to say?"

His eyes looked weary and no light came into them even when he spoke to this man who had so greatly befriended him in the past.

"Nothing. You have acted as you see fit, and I only wait to go," said Trent, in his deep voice.

"Then we shall await in silence. When the report has come you may go."

From the corridors the ceaseless movement of feet sounded as many minutes passed away. Trent began thinking of Kettling, of Kettling's many brilliant and searching remarks regarding how this people lived the life of the imagination, and inevitably identified themselves with those that were strong, those that prevailed, those that imposed their wills upon others so as to avoid the suspicion of inferiority, deriving from such fancies a sense of power and security, making them in their dreams the wielders of swords, the riders of plumed horses, the leaders of armies with many banners, able to face the outer world. Kettling was always right. He reasoned correctly. He saw into the heart of things. He found the right analysis. Trent hungered to speak with him—to get comfort from him.

The food on the table grew cold. All the time the master of the barrier city sat staring at it, as if meditating on the problem of life and death, as if lost in a trance. The silence of this other man oppressed him. He saw in it censure at a moment when he hungered for praise; it made his isolation all the harder to bear. He seemed to have lost something of his vim, something of that restless

energy which had borne him through every trial. But when at last he heard sharp steps outside, he sprang to his feet in his customary way.

The door opened slowly and a solemn procession marched in two by two. The leaders bore stiffly against their shoulders the broad, yellow coloured arrows of buckram, adorned with small triangular flags, which confer the power of life and death, and are very ancient symbols indeed, once bestowed by the emperor. Beside them marched a tall, lugubrious person, the provost-marshal.

The procession came to attention, and the lugubrious man began in a high-pitched, unmelodious voice:

"A report for the high commander. In obedience to orders: machine-gun detachments were assembled and the specially trained soldiers of the provost-marshal's office assumed responsibility. The condemned men were surrounded on the order from the provost-marshal's office. Firing commenced and was continued for seventeen minutes when all except a few were dead, the last being executed by the pistol-corps. The orders have been obeyed."

He advanced two steps and laid on the table the seal which he had received.

General Wang stood stock-still.

"Has the disposal of the bodies been arranged?" he asked.

"It is even now proceeding."

"By what method?"

"The bodies are placed on railway wagons."

"Let it be done quickly. Have earth sprinkled everywhere so that there be no signs. The wagons with bullet marks are also to be burnt. Go——"

The procession turned and marched out again as it had come.

General Wang breathed deeply. He was about to speak when the lieutenant in charge of the telephones entered hurriedly.

"The posts have telephoned," he said, looking uneasily at the foreigner.

His chief frowned.

"What are the reports?" he said harshly.

The lieutenant advanced two steps and dropped his voice to a murmur:

"They have reported that the soldiers have been brought back, but they fear that there has been misfortune."

General Wang's face became convulsed.

"What is this?" he cried roughly. "What has been telephoned? Speak clearly."

The lieutenant, confused by his chief's manner, stammered:

"It is not clear from the reports what occurred, but a foreigner's house was attacked and they were about to burn it when our patrols arrived. The talk was that foreigners had been killed, but the patrols did not investigate, only drawing the troops off as was ordered."

"Come to the telephone-room," commanded General Wang furiously.

In the telephone-room he tore the head-phone from a soldier and began speaking himself.

"The chief commander. Report what information about the foreigners. Yes—I hear. It was on the seashore that the soldiers were found. At the first house. Yes— There was trouble—then they attacked. On the roof? They went up with poles. Two were thrown down and killed.

But next— The one-armed foreigner *Sha-doon* . . . killed. . . ."

Suddenly, he tore the head-phone off and flung it back to the soldier.

The Rat—attentive because he had been listening to every word—received the orders that leaped from his lips.

"My horse. Sound the alarm. The cavalry escort. I go at once—" He turned to Trent. "You heard? It is not clear, but I greatly fear for *Sha-doon* And it was *Sha-doon* who made my victory possible. *Sha-doon* killed. . . ." He shouted his orders again, purple in the face. The Yamên rocked with running feet as cavalry trumpets sounded. The Rat rushed in with his general's sword and revolvers. The escort tumbled out and ran for their horses. It was as if a tumult had burst forth. The machine-gunners, not knowing what had happened, knelt round their guns as though the order to fire might be given. The report spread from man to man that *Sha-doon* had been killed. The secretary in black, sitting in the inner rooms, occupied with secret things, flung his work into a drawer and peered out, panic-stricken. A soldier ran forward with a piebald mount, richly caparisoned; a second brought Trent his pony. In a fever of excitement they started down the dusty street, across the grim railway-tracks, still strewn with the carnage of the firing-parties, on to the long winding country-road that led to the sea.

General Wang was better mounted than the rest and raced ahead. Behind him the escort thundered, flogging their ponies mercilessly with their short whisp. The wind, blowing down from the mountains in terrific gusts on this open plain, hurled them forward in clouds of dust which obscured even the trees. They galloped madly mile after

mile, strung out on the brown road like a string of beads until men and horses were dizzy from dust and panting.

They were on sandy soil now and near the sea, but General Wang still flogged his pony as if his life depended upon maintaining his lead. All his energy, all his will-power was concentrated on this task which had risen out of the storm and utterly surprised him. He galloped wildly to the beach, and a great wave breaking suddenly reached his pony's feet before he could wheel. Thus it happened that Trent and he reached the villa at precisely the same moment and tumbled from their ponies simultaneously.

They ran up the steps through the litter of wrecked furniture without a word. A woman came out—it was Gladys, looking like a ghost.

"Sha-doon?" cried General Wang shrilly, repeating words she did not understand. *"Sha-doon, Sha-doon."*

"What's happened?" cried Trent.

"In there," she said, pointing behind. "Oh, how we waited for you! They attacked us."

The general had run past her; now she started back apprehensively as man after man of his escort galloped up until the house was surrounded by a throng of men and smoking animals, panting, blowing, as they moved round the wreckage, the soldiers exclaiming and pointing.

"Is Shardun badly hurt?" exclaimed Trent.

Gladys was weeping; she held up a hand as if to bid him not to move away; something in her manner made him turn pale with apprehension.

She grasped one of his wrists, as if she did not know what she were doing.

"Captain Shardun isn't so badly hurt," she gasped, "but we don't know what's happened to the boat, we don't

know what's happened to Mrs. Trent. That was before they attacked the house. Dr. Kettling walked to the creek as soon as we got back, but the boat had drifted away and he could do nothing, and then when he came back we were surrounded, and then he was struck with stones——"

Trent stood rigid.

There was something hard and menacing in his manner, as if he were among enemies, who had stripped him of his possessions, something exactly as it had been when he had lain bound by the brigands.

"She was left in the boat," he repeated accusingly. "She was never brought here—when I went to get help for you all——"

"Listen, listen!" she cried desperately. "Not a minute was lost after we came back— Captain Shardun asked Dr. Kettling to go at once, and he walked straight to the creek without coming near the house. We saw him do it—all of us. He was gone a long time, and whilst he was gone, whilst we were wondering why he was so long, the house was suddenly surrounded by the soldiers, who roared at Captain Shardun, repeating his name and frightening us two women back into the house. We closed the shutters, we hoped that it would pass. In the midst of it Dr. Kettling returned. . . . The boat had been floated off by the wind before he got there——"

He was listening to her intently, moistening his lips with his tongue and tasting the acrid taste of the alkali dust that was so thick on his face. She went on:

"What could we do—we never thought that anything would happen like this? . . . We were driven out of the house to the roof; they were tearing down the shutters and smashing the windows, and we went up the staircase on to the roof where they stoned us for many minutes.

They would have killed us without Captain Shardun, who fought like a madman on the staircase. . . . Then we heard the bugles and we knew that you had got through. . . . The soldiers drew off at once—there were floods of them by then; they covered the sands. Then we came down the staircase, and the servants who had fled came back—and I saw the sea——"

With that she faltered and stopped. Mountainous waves were crashing on the beach. They raced after one another, the wind ripping off great clouds of spray which hung in the air like white shrouds before they fell back into the waters. In the whole circle of the horizon there was nothing but stormy waste, dark, angry, forbidding.

Trent took a step.

"Where's Kettling?" he said, in a voice she had never heard before. "I can't believe it—there's something wrong about this story——"

Into the villa he walked very stiffly. Shardun and Kettling were sitting bandaged on cane chairs retrieved from the wreckage; and leaning over them earnestly General Wang was trying to piece together what had happened so that he might exact vengeance.

"Tell him," he said to Kettling, "that I had a great fear that he had been killed. I shall make amends, oh, yes, I shall make amends. What is it, what is it?"

Kettling had seen Trent and given a convulsive cry. Then he began in a high-pitched whisper: "She has told you, she has told you. . . . I am to blame, I and no one else. The boat was floating away when I reached the creek and she was asleep so peacefully—I saw her lying there. . . . The wind was blowing already. It caught the furled sail, and the boat sped on. . . . It went as if a mysterious power had seized it—as if heaven had conspired with the

wind and the waters. . . . My voice was powerless to reach her. . . . If I had been a great swimmer . . . but I can hardly swim. . . . I waited for many minutes. . . . And the boat went on, caught by the current, across the bay——"

He stopped and sobbed convulsively like a woman, covering his face.

But a ray of hope had come to Trent.

"She must have waked up as soon as it got rough," he cried. "She's a good sailor and a great swimmer. She must have got ashore. I am going to search——"

Then Shardun stood up stiffly.

"Hold hard, wait a minute; what can you do in this storm? We've sent the servants along the bay with a promise of a great reward, telling them to get the fishermen out. They've been gone an hour— Hold hard." He grasped his friend by the shoulder, and hobbled away with him, whispering.

"What is it?" said General Wang fiercely in the vernacular to Kettling, who answered in a fearful whisper:

"Ta nei-jen yen ssü-lo (His wife has died by drowning)."

"Dead!" exclaimed the commander. "The boat floated away and overturned?" He walked towards Trent to whom Shardun was talking earnestly; stopped half-way and came slowly back. "Is this certain—have proper measures been taken—how could such a thing occur?"

He was uneasy again; an unruly element had again been injected into this problem of the earth which he wished to control.

"We have sent the servants along the coast to the fishing villages with the offer of a great reward," muttered Kettling. "But how could any boat live in such a sea?"

"There is still a chance," exclaimed the other. "Our

boats can keep afloat in the roughest seas. I go to comfort our friend——"

Across the room he went with his quick, sharp steps. He took Trent by the arm, talking to him earnestly, assuring him that he would have the boat found.

Something of his energy stole into them all; as they went out to the beach he harangued them ceaselessly.

"You see, it is better, just as I said. The wind from the mountains has gone down. Tomorrow will be fine—look how blood-red is the sun; fine and hot will it be. I can do something in the matter of search——"

Trent was ahead, walking swiftly towards the creek; they all followed, more slowly because Shardun was hobbling. General Wang continued to talk; a flood of words issued from his mouth which no one understood except Kettling.

They came to the end of the walk; there was the creek, brim-full from the rough sea which sent miniature tidal waves rushing up it.

Trent was standing knee-deep in the water; two peasants in their sober blue clothing were there, and they pointed out to sea and spoke to him.

"You see; they have seen it," cried General Wang. But at once he corrected himself. "No, it is a ship, not a boat—a steamer, a gunboat. See how she plunges."

Far out at sea there was indeed a ship approaching that seemed buried in the waves or flung high in the air. She slipped through the water rapidly, heading from across the bay straight for the beach.

"A destroyer," cried Shardun. "They've remembered us at last."

The wind was fast dropping as the sun went down, and the waves sensibly diminished. They watched in silence the

destroyer climb forward. Some distance from shore she put up her helm; and a boat was launched and came tumbling towards them. Waiting its chance, it came racing in on a roller that brought it almost to the mouth of the creek. Instantly the crew, who were encased in life-preservers, jumped in up to their waists and dragged her across a sand-bank to safety.

A sub-lieutenant in oilskins waded ashore.

"What's been happening here?" he said briskly, looking from one to another, and returning General Wang's salute with a stare of curiosity. "Everybody safe? China's pretty disturbed just now. What's wrong with China?"

"China be damned," said Shardun harshly. "A sampan put out before the storm with one of our people in it, a lady. Do you think there's any chance in this storm?"

The sub-lieutenant swallowed an oath, and coloured slightly.

"We didn't want to risk it in a destroyer on this coast until half an hour ago. A sampan. . . ." He shook his head, and watched Trent who was still knee-deep in the water staring out to sea. "Is it his wife? We'll do our best by dragging when the fishing-boats can get out. I'll go over and speak to him——"

He moved off, followed by Shardun and Mrs. Hoskin.

Kettling had not spoken—he stood motionless, his lips moving as if in prayer. Gladys looked back, and then walked up to him.

"He loved her," he was muttering. "I could have saved her if I had shouted with all my strength. He loved her, and I did not know——"

At the bottom of a sand-dune the cavalry escort stood

waiting for their general to rejoin them. Presently he turned and walked to his horse which he mounted with a leap. Slowly up the sand-dune he rode with the troop at his heels, back to his world which touched this other world only in moments of need—which was isolated from this other world by barriers greater than time and space in the hours of mourning and grief; prepared to wait for a better hour, which would not fail to come just as brightness succeeds gloom, and calm the greatest storms; thinking already of new schemes which would allow him to rise to greater heights with the help of those who were so infallibly his coadjutors and his dupes.

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